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Vol. 1—No. 2 DEC. 1950 25¢

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RAIDERS of the SOLAR FRONTIER



CHAPTER I—*The Incurables of Ceres*



ALTIMER stumbled heavily and fell from the ramp to the frozen rocks. His hand went automatically to his belt. But the spacesuit he was wearing had no belt,

neither had it the holster and the pistol that for so long had seemed part of himself. Weaponless, Latimer lay where he had fallen, snarled wordlessly at the guard whose farewell shove had caused him to lose his balance, at the vast bulk of *Charon* like some dark tower blotting out the stars.



By A. BERTRAM CHANDLER

Only one group of defenders stood between Earth and the black marauder from the depths of space—and that was Alan Latimer's tiny planet of exiled criminals, unarmed, despised and burning for their own private vengeance.

For long minutes he lay there. He was aware that the airlock door in *Charon's* side had shut, that the telescopic ramp had retracted to its recess in the shell plating, and knew that it would not be long before the main drive of the prison ship seared the rocks that were his comfortable couch with all-consuming fire. But

he did not care. To a man such as he the merciful penal laws of his time held little of mercy. Better, he told himself, a quick, clean death than a long lifetime lived out among the Incurables of Ceres. He looked at the stars and waited for what, at worst, would be only a microsecond of agony.

Somebody's clumsy, gloved hands were tugging at the sleeve of his suit. Somebody was trying to pull him to his feet. He did not shift his gaze from the glittering stars, but he spoke, his voice strange and tinny in his own helmet phones.

"Get away from here," he said. Then, more urgently: "Get away from here, you fool! Don't you know that the ship will be blasting off at any moment?"

The other made no reply, but the insistent tugging continued. Actuated by rage rather than by any urge towards self preservation Latimer started to scramble to his feet. Even to himself his motives were not clear—but his hands in their thick gloves tingled with anticipation of the stinging blows that would send this meddler scurrying back to the safety of the airlock under the brow of the low cliff.

Then the stranger spoke. It was a low voice, softly husky, well modulated—and even the inevitable distortions of the helmet phones could not disguise its magical qualities. Neither could they conceal the undertones compounded of despair, and misery, and resignation.

"Perhaps you are right," Latimer heard. "Perhaps you are wise. Perhaps your action—our action—will encourage others to follow suit when *Charon* comes again. And then this little world will be the poorer by so many little, personal Hells. And that will be good."

It was a low voice, and a softly husky voice, and it held within itself a honeyed sweetness that had long been lacking from the world of Alan Latimer. Not that his world had been in any way drab or dreary. It had been a good world—harsh, perhaps, but not lacking the bright color of new faces, fresh scenes, the explosive flares of excitement and danger.

In his world as it had been it is possible that such a voice, uncon-

sciously intimate, full of unspoken promises, would have failed to stir him. But within the narrow compass of this new world, this world that he had made for himself, or that the peculiar, inimitable combination of genes that came from his parents, and from their parents, had made for him, the voice promised a light, a color, that must be sadly lacking from the days to come. Or it could have been that it brought back memories of a still older world, a plane of existence in which there were other realities than the harsh, turbulent life of the frontiers, the flare of rocket drive against the stars, and the stars themselves, sharp, crystalline, with no kindly atmospheric veil between their hard brilliance and his eyes.

"No!" he heard himself shouting. "We're alive—and we stay that way! Come on!"

He was on his feet now. He roughly disengaged himself from the clumsy paw that was still clutching the right sleeve of his armor, put out his own gloved hands to grasp the shoulders of the girl. He did not stop to examine the face that he could dimly see within the transparent bubble of the helmet. He swung her so that she was facing away from him and then, clumsy in his haste, rushed her towards the safety of the low cliff and the airlock. He hoped desperately that the officers of *Charon* would be looking down from Control, that they would see that the field was not yet clear for blasting off.

THEY were still a score of yards from the shelter when *Charon's* pilot depressed his firing key. Had Ceres possessed an external atmosphere the roar of the blast might well have deafened them for life. As it was their senses registered a blinding, intolerable light that seemed to strike clear through their

skulls to the retina. The ground beneath them shook, and the wave of incandescent gases that was volatilized rock lifted them and cast them from it. In spite of the insulation of their suits they felt the scorching fury of the blast. Had it not been for the insulation they would have been burned to a crisp. And the force with which they were flung to the ground stunned them.

Alan Latimer was first to recover. He staggered to his feet, putting one hand out to the cliff face for support. Blood tasted salt in his mouth and there was a warm trickle from his nostrils. He disregarded it—attired as he was there was nothing else that he could do—and blinked to clear his befogged eyes. He looked up, saw *Charon*, a fast waning star among the stars, another spot of light among the countless millions.

For a while he watched her, his heart going out with her, revisiting in memory all the ports and cities that he would never again see. It was not until the girl stirred, striking feebly with her arm against his booted foot, that he bethought himself of her and her safety. He stooped, then, awkward in the stiff articulations of his armor, and picked her up. He strode the few short paces to the airlock, dull silver against the rugged black of the cliff. With little of evident tenderness he lowered her to the rocks, fumbled for the controls to the right of the entrance. When the outer door opened he dragged the girl into the little compartment. Already he was beginning to resent the fact that, wittingly or unwittingly, she had balked his plans for a swift, clean suicide.

Pressures equalized, the inner door opened, and he passed through into the ante-chamber beyond. Dimly, he heard the rattle of armor as he let the girl fall from a semi-sitting posture to one that was lifelessly supine. He snapped open the visor of his

helmet, took his first breath of the air of the notorious prison world of *Ceres*.

"SO YOU made it after all," remarked the little man behind the big desk, disinterestedly. "You wouldn't 'a' been the first. There's many a poor sap gone out that way—an' thought that he was bein' hellish clever."

"So you knew?" demanded Latimer.

Big, menacing, he regarded the grey, clerkish keeper of the gate. He was ready to resent the fact that these people had known of his attempted suicide, had made no effort to prevent it. Then he remembered that it had been an inhabitant of *Ceres* who had pulled him back into the world of the living—and that she had received scant thanks for so doing. The dangerous flare died in his pale eyes, the hard lines of his deeply tanned face softened. With clumsy haste he dropped to his knees, flung open the visor of his rescuer's helmet.

"And *she* knew, too," chuckled the little clerk. "If I hadn't let her see the advance copy of *Charon's* passenger list she'd never 'a' gone outside. But as soon as all the passengers were tallied in but one—an' that one Lieutenant Alan Latimer—nothin' nor nobody could stop her. . . ."

All this Latimer half heard as he stripped the clumsy armor from the body of the girl. The clerk rattled on, then almost fell over backwards in panic as Latimer rose to his feet, reached out with one big hand. But it was only the gaudy silk handkerchief protruding from the little man's pocket that he was wanting. And when he had it he returned at once to the unconscious girl, began wiping away the trickle of blood that was still oozing from the corner of her mouth, that had gushed in a stream from her nostrils. Then—

"Fetch some cold water!" he barked.

The other hastened to obey. His grumbling monotone as he did so was faintly audible, irritating.

"Don't know why she bothered. Don't know why he's bothering. We're free on Ceres. If folks want to die, we let 'em. . . ."

"You! What's your name?"

"Marcus." Then, reluctantly, "sir."

"And what are you here for?"

The little clerk's voice was sullen.

"Forgery. Embezzlement."

"And you know what I'm here for. So, keep quiet unless you're spoken to."

And in the silence that followed Latimer completed his superficial examination of the girl. He worked deftly, mechanically, assured himself that no bones were broken, and all the time the conscious part of his mind was bitterly regretting that he had not held her there with him to die in the blast of *Charon's* jets. The voice had stirred faint chords in his memory, but he had assured himself that it was imagination. Now that he could see the woman herself, shocked disbelief had rapidly given place to shocked credulity. The figure, true, was fuller, with more than a hint of blowsiness. But the cruelest change had been that in the face. Nobody could deny that Lorraine Towers was still beautiful. But the mouth that had always been a little too large, too full-lipped, was now frankly sensual. The fresh charm that he had known so long ago in Port Gregory was now the dangerous allure of the unashamed wanton.

Latimer dipped the handkerchief afresh into the cold water that Marcus had brought. Again he bathed the pallid face of the woman. She moaned and stirred. Slowly the heavy-lidded eyes opened, stared darkly at the anxious face of the ex-lieutenant.

"Alan. I couldn't believe it when I

saw your name on the passenger list. I couldn't believe it, until I saw you sprawled on the rocks, waiting for *Charon* to blast off. . . ."

"I'm afraid it's true, Laurie. . . ."

"My dear. I don't know whether to be glad or sorry. It would have been nice to have died with you out there. . . . It can still mean something to us if we live together. . . ."

"We can go outside and open the visors of our helmets," whispered Latimer bitterly. "It would be best that way. Otherwise, for you, a murderer. For me, . . ."

"Alan! Don't!"

"We can go outside. Where we have been, you and I, since those days in Port Gregory the devil alone knows. But we can share the journey's end. . . ."

"I'm not stopping you!" cackled Marcus. "You're free, Lieutenant. You're on Ceres. The only laws are the laws you make yourself!"

"And here's one that I'm making now. And that is, get out of our sight at once!"

"You can't. . . ."

"I've killed two men, one with my bare hands. Better men than you. So. . . ."

WHEN Marcus had gone Lorraine rose unsteadily to her feet. She sat in the chair behind the desk that the little forger had vacated. From a pocket in her dress she produced a mirror and a compact, and with a hand that hardly trembled began to repair the ravages wrought upon her complexion by the events of the past half hour. When she had finished she opened the top drawer of the desk, brought out a bottle, two glasses, a box of cigarettes.

Latimer was grateful for the smoke, for the stiff slug of good whiskey. But, sitting on the desk, he did not like what he saw as he looked down at Lorraine. He did not like the way in which she tossed down her



In spite of their space-suits they felt the scorching fury of the blast.

drink, refilled her glass immediately. He looked down, and the look on his harsh face could not be mistaken for anything else but disapproval.

"Cheer up, Alan darling. We're here, both of us. For life. So—better make the best of it."

"Yes. And we'll start like this."

He reached down, snatched the glass from the girl's hand, hurled it and its contents against the further wall. It did not break but fell down the metal surface with almost ludicrous slowness. The trickle of whiskey reached the floor only a second after what had been its container. And the sombre, chastened mood that had been driven away from the girl by the warmth of the spirits returned. She got up slowly from the chair, the utmost dejection in every

drooping line of her figure. With slow, dragging steps she walked toward the airlock door.

"Where are you going?"

"What does it matter? Outside."

Latimer waited until her hand went out to the controls of the inner door, then jumped down from his seat. Two long strides—almost leaps in the feeble gravitational field of Ceres—carried him to Lauranne. As before his hands went out to grasp her shoulders, but this time it was to turn her to him. And the pale, blond head of the man went down to that of the woman, was enveloped in the black mist of her hair. For long seconds they stood thus and then, gently, Latimer led Lauranne back to the desk, seated her in the chair behind the massive piece of furniture. He himself remained standing.

"You were right the first time," he admitted at last. "We must live, I don't know why, but in each other we have something. . . ."

"Something," whispered the girl, raising her tear-stained face. "Something. A pale shadow of our former lives. Don't lie to me Alan—for you, I can never replace the surge of an accelerating ship, the flare of rocket drive against the stars, the ordered routine of your little world of grey paint and burnished metal. For you, more than for me, this is the end of the trip. This is that last haven of which Swinburne sang:

*"There go the loves that wither,
The old loves with wearier wings;
And all dead years draw thither,
And all disastrous things;
Dead dreams of days forsaken,
Blind buds that snows have shaken,
Wild leaves that winds have taken,
Red strays of ruined springs. . . ."*

Latimer pulled thoughtfully at his cigarette. Thoughtfully he watched the smoke, watched it as though its spirals and convolutions held the secret of the Universe. The girl

looked up at him, her face yearning, hurt that she should be ignored.

At last Latimer looked down, his lips beginning to move. If he had been given the time to speak, his words must inevitably have been drowned by the trampling of heavy-booted feet along the corridor outside. His hand was a rapid blur as it flashed towards the holster that no longer hung at his side. Then, moving fast, he huddled Lauranne off the chair behind the desk, picked it up so that it could, if need be, be used as a weapon.

The door crashed open.

CHAPTER II

Boss of the Exile World

"SO YOU make your own laws," said Kimball. He leaned well back in the chair that was almost a throne, picked his teeth thoughtfully with a wooden toothpick from the little vase on the table by his right hand. Latimer, watching him intently, was repelled by the man's grossness, his untidy, slovenly attire, but was impressed by the aura of very real power that surrounded the Boss of Ceres.

Kimball spat the little chewed fragments of wood falling in a fine spray around the cuspidor at his feet.

"So our little friend Marcus told you that we were all anarchists," he sneered.

"I never said so." Latimer's voice was firm, uncompromising.

"I know you didn't. But I know Marcus. They allow me to have a few little machines to play with, Latimer. I've got a lie detector. But I never trouble to use it on people like you. I know your type, you won't talk until you feel like it. And then you'll tell the truth. Maybe not the whole truth, but, nevertheless, nothing but the truth. And I can use men like you. I can trust men like you."

"Thank you. And the alternative?"

"Nothing too bad. You become an ordinary citizen of Ceres. Which means that you have a sufficiency of fresh air and food and artificial sunlight. Which means that you will be allowed to potter around with any of the footling arts and crafts that are encouraged here. Which means that you're liable to be beaten up at any time that my police see fit."

The room, with its luxurious appointments, blurred before Latimer's eyes. Fists clenched, he started forward. On either side of him a guard clutched his arm, another struck him across the mouth with a hard hand. Faint and far away he heard the voice of Lauranne. "Don't," she was saying. "Don't be a fool, Alan!"

And the words served only to stir him to fury. His right arm lifted, lifting with it the man who was clinging to it. It swung across his body in a swift arc and the guard at his left hand was felled by the club that the other's body had become. The guard who had struck him went down, the lower half of his face bloody and curiously blurred. It was not until later that Latimer felt the pain in his broken knuckles.

But there were too many of the guards. They fell upon him from all corners of the room, they bore him down with the weight of their bodies. And there was the sharp clicking of steel on steel, and the kiss of cold metallic bands on Latimer's feet and ankles, and when they pulled him to his feet he tottered there, unable to move.

There followed seconds of useless straining at the handcuffs, the leg-irons. Then the bloody haze before Latimer's eyes slowly faded, and through the thinning mists he saw the flabby, paradoxically strong face of the Boss. Kimball had one fat hand upraised in a demand for silence.

"Hear me out," he was saying

almost plaintively. "You, of all persons, must know the need for discipline. If what I hear of you is true your crimes were no more than strict enforcement of discipline. And yet you seek to hamper my poor efforts to bring law and order to this lawless little world.

"Think well, Latimer. What would Ceres be were it not for some organized body to enforce certain standards of law and decency? Perhaps my rule is not democratic—but, I ask you, have we the raw materials of democracy here? I will be frank with you. Back on Earth I wanted too much power, and I wasn't overly particular in the methods I used to get it. I was apprehended once, psychoed and warned. But they couldn't change me. I was apprehended a second time—one of my underlings was both jealous and ambitious. And this time I was classified as an Incurable.

"And here, on Ceres, I still want power. And still I'm not particular about the methods I use to get it."

"So I see."

"Now you are being foolish. What would have happened to you if you had been brought before one of your Admirals and attempted to assault him? And they rule only squadrons of ships. I rule a world."

Latimer forebore to make unkind comparisons between the size and the striking power of those same squadrons and that of Kimball's domain. He only said shortly:

"All right, I'll play ball. What's in it for me if I come in with you?"

"Membership in my police force—with prospects of promotion. This carries the right to first choice of the comforts and luxuries brought by Charon. The right to marry whom you please."

"Marry?"

When Latimer heard Lauranne's little gasp—more of hurt than indignation—he was sorry that he had not been able to keep the amused in-

credulity out of his voice. But Kimball, his tone unchanged, continued:

"Yes, marry. We are a very moral people, Latimer. There are those, of course, who are not moral, but unless they offend against public decency no action is taken against them. But as one of the governing class you will be expected to respect the laws that you, yourself, will enforce."

"Law and order," said Latimer musingly. "Here, on Ceres. Take off these damned irons, Kimball, and I'll sign your articles or whatever you call them."

Kimball motioned to the guards, one of whom produced a key.

"And, in future, call me 'Boss,'" he warned. "And you, Constable Merri-
rick, rustle up a copy of the contract so that Constable Latimer can sign. While you're about it bring along a marriage license. We'll tie this fellow up in more ways than one!"

THERE was something wrong with the park. It was not the grass, neither was it the gorgeous flowers; their equal would have been hard to find anywhere on any of the inhabited worlds. It was not the cavern roof that arched far overhead—that was lost in a dim blue haze from which streamed the health-giving rays of the big sun lamps. It could almost have been the sky of Earth in misty mood.

Constable Alan Latimer stared about him, barely conscious of the light pressure on his arm that was Lauranne Latimer's hand. But she, ever conscious of him, read his thoughts.

"No children," she said. "That is what is wrong."

And the man looked about him at the wide expanse of green lawn, at the sedately strolling couples, young, middle-aged, old, and saw that she was right. It was all too orderly, unnaturally quiet. He realized with a sudden pang that, in all proba-

bility, the only happy man was the bent, grey gardener who was working with slow and loving patience in a bright flower bed near by.

Gently he disengaged his arm from his wife's light grasp, raised it so that it fitted about her waist. They strolled on, enjoying the feel of the smooth, velvety grass under their bare feet, listening to the songs of the birds that were such a poor substitute for the joyous clamor of children at play.

"That has always seemed to me to be cruelest of all," he mused. "The sterilization law."

"But it's kind, my dear. You couldn't bring up children in a penal colony. Whether or not their heredity was unsound they, themselves, would grow up to be criminal types. And if they were taken from us at an early age and sent to Earth for their upbringing, that would be crueler still. For us."

"Perhaps you are right. But I know Ceres better now. And it wouldn't be a bad world in which to rear children. No worse than many another."

"As it is now. But we are fortunate in our Boss, Broderick, before him, called himself King. And he was mad and bad. Then there was a long period of anarchy, which was worse than ever the rule of King Broderick had been. Kimball wants power and is quite ruthless, but he uses his power well. The man who follows him—who can tell? He may be strong and bad; he may be weak and good—which will be worse."

The two walked on in silence.

"You know," admitted Latimer, "this is not bad. This world, I mean. I have you, I was a fool, my dear, ever to lose touch with you after I sailed from Port Gregory. But I was young then—and the Service was wife and parents and children. But I am glad that I have found you again. If only it could have been some other way..."

"What did happen? I've respected the privacy of your past, Alan, just as you've respected mine. But. . . A woman is always curious, I guess."

"It will do no harm to tell you. The first time was when I was second in command of *Pathfinder*. We were on a survey job, measuring, charting, along with a spot of geology, in the Belt. It was the other side of the Sun from Ceres. Well, the charts we had weren't too accurate—and one day we found ourselves in one of those jams that it would be almost impossible for the finest mathematician in the System to duplicate on paper. We were on a collision orbit with no less than half a dozen hunks of assorted cosmic debris, and there was no way out. The automatic controls just blew all their fuses and died.

"Some didn't get into their suits in time, we never had a chance to get a message away, and in the finish there were five survivors in our number two boat, with myself in charge.

"The way things were, the best policy was to put ourselves on the Earth-Jupiter lane and wait until *Thunderqueen* came along. It was a long wait, and long before she was due, long before we could raise her on our lifeboat transmitter, tempers were wearing very thin. And we were hungry all the time—have you ever tried to make a meal of food concentrates? The nourishment is there, the protein and the calories and the vitamins. But there's no bulk. You're always hungry. And the boat was cramped, and we were all in each other's way, and we hated each other.

"And then, during my sleep period, one of the technical ratings, a fellow named Burton, tried to raid the food locker. I woke up, and we fought. I fought a little harder than was necessary, but once I got my fingers round his throat I couldn't let go."

"But that was only the first."

"Yes, that was only the first, I was

warned, and psychoed, and discharged as fit for duty. And so I was until a barroom brawl in Port Lasselé. You know how I always used to boast about my skill with side-arms, about being quick on the draw. There was this fellow in the bar, town marshal, I think he was. I don't know what he was like sober, but he was most unpleasant drunk. Perhaps I was, too. Anyhow, he pulled a gun on me. And before it cleared his holster I'd drilled him between the eyes.

"And that was the finish for me."

L AURANNE said nothing. Latimer did not look at her face, but he felt the warm waves of sympathy that radiated from her. Only one who, like himself, had come to this sink-hole of the Solar System, could possibly sympathize.

They came to the grass verge. Automatically they stooped, put on the sandals that they had been carrying. They walked on over the smooth-surfaced floor of the tunnel. It did not matter to them that the artificial sunlight of the park had been replaced by lamps that made no pretense of being other than utilitarian lighting fixtures. There was a warmth between them, and a dim but steady radiance that needed no assistance from outside power supplies.

Yet, as he walked, Latimer took almost unconscious note of his surroundings. He was in a part of Ceres strange to him. The tunnel walls were devoid of the usual doorways and windows of residential apartments. The floor was coated with a fine dust. There were the tracks of one of the little scooters to show that somebody had come this way, and recently, but that was the only sign of traffic there was.

Still they walked on, half in a dream, welded to each other by the seal of confession. The voice of the sentry, harsh, commanding, came as a sudden shock.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"Friend," replied Latimer automatically.

He looked up to see one of Kimball's police, smart in his uniform of blue and silver. The metal-shod stove was held threateningly, at the ready.

"Advance, friend," began the constable, "and . . ."

His eyes dropped to the little silver badge on the left breast of Latimer's civilian shirt, lifted to study his face. And there was a light of recognition, of the memory of past intimacies, in his eyes as he shifted his regard to the girl.

"All right," he said. "You're the new man, aren't you? Latham or Latimer or something. I suppose that Lauranne is showing you the sights."

The cold, hard flame leapt into vicious life behind Latimer's pale eyes. He was often to wonder later what he would have done, what would have been the consequences of his actions, had not his wife taken charge. He felt her grip on his arm, painfully tight, and he heard her say: "Alan, this is Philip Lane, an old friend of mine. Philip, this is Alan Latimer, my husband."

His hand went out, but only to grip that of the other. Lane was talking quickly, nervously, fully conscious that the air was charged with hostility.

"Haven't they shown you round here yet? You'll be getting your spell of guard duty soon enough. . . ."

HE LED them down the tunnel, around a bend. And the tunnel was sealed with a bulkhead of gleaming steel. In this was set a door, like that of some huge safe or treasure vault. The levers and wheels and dials on its shining face would not have looked out of place on the control panel of a Jovian Mail Liner.

"And what's behind all that?" demanded Latimer, his anger giving place to curiosity.

"That's what we'd all like to know. But we never see behind that door. Nobody does, not even the Boss. But every year *Charon* brings a flock of technicians from Earth, and they're escorted here by a regiment of armed guards from the ship, and they potter around with the machinery and we know that we're all right for another year.

"There's light in there, Latimer, and heat, and the power that drives the pumps. There's Power in there, and every Boss that we've ever had in Ceres would have sold his soul to lay his grubby paws on it. We have men here, cracksmen, who could have this door, and the other doors, open in less time than it'd take you or me to open a can of sardines. . . ."

"Then why don't they?"

"Because there's always at least one of us here to stop 'em. Because if they did we'd all find out if it's true what the technicians tell us. Because if they did folks back on Earth and Mars would see a first-class nova right in their gardens."

"You mean. . . .?"

"I mean that if anybody tries to get through those doors, or tries to get through to the vault in any other way, up goes the atomic power station that's tucked away in there."

"Oh," replied Latimer inadequately. "Thanks, Lane." He looked at his watch. "Time we were getting back now. I have to be on duty at 2000."

"A policeman's lot is not a happy one," riposted the other. "But it could be unhappier. Eh, Lauranne?"

"I wouldn't know," she replied frigidly. "Come, Alan."

She felt that the muscles of his arm, beneath the thin shirt, were tensed. But now she felt that she was barely able to control the monster that had been called from the dark abyss of her husband's ancestry in *Pathfinder's* lifeboat; that, once called into being, had destroyed his career.

"Come, Alan," she said again.

And when they were around the bend of the tunnel he turned to her and asked: "What is he to you?"

"He is nothing. And he was nothing. Will you be content with that?"

"Yes," he replied at last, slowly, grudgingly. "I suppose so."

CHAPTER III

The Ship from Outside

INSPECTOR Alan Latimer cursed as the telephone, shrill, insistent, interrupted his leisurely breakfast.

It was Lauranne who answered it. She was gone a long time. When she returned Latimer looked at her with more than a faint distaste, reflecting that women such as she should never sloop around in dressing gowns.

"It's for you," she said.

"Oh. Who is it?"

"The Boss."

"You were a long time talking to him."

"Was I? Anyhow, it's important."

Latimer gulped a mouthful of egg, washed it down with coffee, rose slowly to his feet.

"In future," he growled, "when calls come for me—or calls that you say are for me—don't hang around in the booth all morning answering them."

"Aren't you going? It was important, I said."

"To you and who else?"

Nevertheless, Latimer went through to the telephone booth, sat down on the little seat before the instrument. From the screen Kimball's flabby, pasty face glowered at him.

"So you're here at last, Latimer. I thought you were never coming."

"The message took long enough to reach me."

"I don't care for your tone of voice, Latimer, but let that pass. Come round to my office at once."

"Why?"

"I don't have to answer questions. Button up your jacket and wipe the egg off your face, and hurry. That's all."

The instrument went dead. Latimer considered calling the Boss back, thought better of it. But the taste of the morning was bitter in his mouth as he went back into the breakfast room to finish his coffee. He drained the cup, put it back into the saucer with an unnecessary clatter. He went into the little hall of the apartment. He took his cap from its peg, clapped it anyhow on to his head without troubling to look into the mirror. He did not kiss Lauranne good-bye.

In Kimball's office he found the Boss nervously pacing up and down. Seated were two men, strangers. They were in uniform. Latimer stared. Charon was not due for two months yet. He looked more closely. The visitors wore the insignia of the Jovian Mail Service: a five-pointed star transfixed by a jagged, conventional lightning bolt.

"Latimer," said Kimball abruptly, pausing in his restless pacing, the inevitable toothpick working with a speed that betrayed the depth of his agitation, "these gentlemen are Captain Pemberthy and Commander Wood of *Thunderqueen*."

"*Thunderqueen*, Boss? But. . ."

"*Thunderqueen* I said and *Thunderqueen* I mean. Captain, this is Inspector Latimer of my police force, Ex-Lieutenant Latimer of the regular navy. . ."

Latimer put out his hand. It was ignored by Pemberthy. The inspector flushed deeply and darkly under his tan, and the cold light flared briefly in his pale eyes. He looked fixedly at the short, stout captain whose hatless head gleamed in the lamplight, at the tall, angular commander. And then anger was replaced by puzzlement. Long and steadily he looked at Commander Wood and did not find that for which he was seeking.

"We had to make a forced landing on your world," began Pemberthy without preamble. "Our tube linings are burnt out, and we don't carry spares. Our hull is strained and leaking badly. We shall have to stay here until help comes. . . ."

"So what?"

"We're being followed. Chased, rather. By a big, black ship that seemed to come from the direction of Polaris—although that means nothing. And she was no Earthly ship. We approached her close when our radar picked her up; thought at first that she was some hitherto undiscovered planetoid with an orbit at right angles to the plane of the ecliptic. We were almost on top of her before we saw what she was. And as we were turning away she let fly with some ray that burned away most of our starboard fin and the venturis of the starboard auxiliaries. We ran, of course. She didn't take any more hostile action that we could see, although, for all we know, she may have used her ray again and missed. One thing she did do—blanketed our radio so that we could neither transmit nor receive. . . ."

"Kimball!" broke in Latimer, "I suggest that you let these officers use our station."

"A blinding glimpse of the obvious!" snarled the Boss. "That was the first thing they asked of me. Carter went along with them. And this blanketing effect of theirs obviously covers us."

"So. Now, Captain, how do you know that you're being followed?"

"I don't know." Pemberthy's voice was peculiarly flat, almost lifeless. "I don't know. But it seems reasonable to suppose that any race sufficiently advanced for interstellar travel will be at least as far advanced as you in the field of electronics. They'll have had their scanners on us ever since the first contact. The mere fact that the radio is dead indicates that."

"And I'm still to be convinced that this marvelous big, black ship is from Outside!" stormed the Boss. "It could be pirates. And if it is, and if they come here, I'm making a deal. Ceres owes no loyalty to the Federation."

"How did you know it was an alien ship, anyhow?"

THE little, fat captain hesitated before making his reply. It was impossible to read his expression, there was no expression to read. His face was that of a carved Buddha. And his tall, thin executive officer sat woodenly in his chair. *Like a cigar store Indian*, Latimer was thinking.

"It was her shape," said Pemberthy at last. "And her hull wasn't smooth, but covered with all kinds of projections. Weapons they might have been, or part of her interstellar drive. And she had her name in big white characters on her bow. And they belonged to no Earthly alphabet. . . ."

"Could have been Arabic or Chinese. Anyhow, a ship capable of coming here from Alpha Centauri or Sirius, or wherever she's supposed to have come from, could have made rings round your decrepit old wagon."

"No. She would not be using her interstellar drive in the vicinity of a planetary system. And it is reasonable to suppose that, even using her reaction motors, she would approach such a system with caution. . . ."

"And so you brought her here. . . ."

"It was the nearest port of refuge," replied Pemberthy simply.

"And do I organize the defense of Ceres?" demanded Latimer sharply.

"Yes. Of course." The Boss seemed mildly surprised that the question had been asked.

"What with?"

Kimball glared at him. He began to say something, then thought better of it. His tone, when at last he did speak, was placatory.

"You're the professional fighting man in this outfit," he said. "I leave that entirely in your hands. And I am sure that these gentlemen will do all that they can to help you."

"First," stated Latimer, "I shall want access to your engine room, Captain Pemberthy. I think that with your tools, your workshops, and with

The captain was silent. But the tall commander stirred and spoke. "Regulations," he said simply, and that was all. But it was the cue that Pemberthy needed.

"Yes. Regulations. You know what happened when your people got control of *Thunderbird*. That must not happen again."



It was a living, pulsing brain he held in his hand—a brain imprisoned in glass.

your converter to manufacture explosives, I shall be able to turn out some Hamilton torpedoes. Don't know how much use they'll be against a race that plays around with death rays, but unless they know enough to degauss their ships they should be fairly effective. And I shall want any arms that you, your passengers, or crew have in your possession."

"Any arms we have, we keep," said Pemberthy flatly. "And I regret to have to say that you will not be allowed to set foot aboard my ship."

"Great Galaxy!" exploded the inspector. "This is no time to be petty. Don't you realize that the fate of this world, of the System, of Man himself, may depend upon your co-operation?"

It was Kimball who found a way out of the impasse.

"Why," he asked, "shouldn't you give these gentlemen details of whatever it is you want made? Then all that will concern you will be the finished article."

And that was how it was finally arranged. And the Hamilton torpedoes were to remain aboard *Thunderqueen* until such time as the black ship of the aliens chose to appear. And with that Latimer had to be content.

He found it especially humiliating that, with their own little world well-guarded, inviolate, the passengers and crew of the Jovian liner were made free of all Ceres.

But even that had its compensations.

FOR long years, ever since the first primitive story-teller soared on the wings of his imagination to the stars, the invasion from Outside had been an ever recurrent theme of mankind's fiction. At first the tide of conquest was to come sweeping in from the Moon or the sister planets, but the instruments of the astronomers had shown the improbabilities inherent in such a plot even before the spaceship slipped, with disconcerting ease, from the realm of fancy into that of fact. Thereafter the invaders were to come from the stars. From which particular star nobody was ever quite sure—but surely among all the glittering hosts of heaven there was one with planets to spawn a race to rival or surpass the technological progress of Man.

But the very idea had been a purely fictional concept for so long that the Ceresians, even if they did accept it intellectually, could never do so with their emotions. Perhaps the only man in the little world to whom this raid from interstellar space was probable, possible, was Alan Latimer. But he had taken part in the Navy's war games, those fleet maneuvers in which half Earth's forces fought, in theory, to the last man and the last gun, in which the other half played the part of Centaurians or Rigellians or whatever the fancy of the Commander-in-Chief might dictate.

As for the rest, the Boss had said that *Thunderqueen* had been attacked by pirates of humble Terran origin. And the Boss, as always, was right. It was true that the captain and officers of the liner stuck to their story of an alien ship, but it was obvious that they were lying as a matter of policy. As long as they could convince the Ceresians that they were about to fight a common enemy an alliance was possible. But that enemy

had to be alien. Captain Pemherthy knew full well that his hosts would far prefer to throw in their lot with the raiders, if they were human, than with himself. It was all so obvious.

Meanwhile, if Inspector Alan Latimer chose to believe the cock-and-hull story of his fellow spacemen, there was more good than harm done. The plans made for the defense of the little world, the organizing, the drilling, were admitted to be necessary. When the pirates came in their black ship any kind of organized resistance would be a most useful bargaining counter. So would the weapons that were being made aboard *Thunderqueen* to Latimer's specifications.

And the strangers who roamed without let or hindrance through the caves and tunnels made a very welcome break in the monotony of life in the prison asteroid. They were not molested; there would be time enough for that when the pirates came. Besides, in spite of Pemherthy's refusal to surrender his arms to Latimer, it was quite obvious that he had enough and to spare of weapons for his own people. They did not wear them ostentatiously, but neither did they go to any great pains to conceal them. And one of the parks had been set aside for their use as a shooting range. Both men and women showed a proficiency that was an effective deterrent to any of the Incurables who might get ideas.

An ex-officer himself, Latimer could not blame the captain. If he had been master of a passenger liner he would not have allowed his charges to wander unprotected about a penal colony. But he would not have allowed shore leave. But perhaps the hull was leaking badly (if so, why not make some attempt to patch it?) and, quite probably, the first that would be known of the approach of the alien would be the sudden destruction of *Thunderqueen*.

THE police force had all been warned to be on the alert for the first signs of internal trouble. But Ceres could well have been some fashionable pleasure resort. Well-dressed men and women strolled the parkways, mingled without snobbery or embarrassment with the colonists. The theatres played always to full houses. Even allowing for the excellence of the talent this was mildly surprising, until one remembered that, with the mysterious blanket still thick over all radio transmission and reception, no Terran entertainment was available.

And as the purely arbitrary days rolled on without the merest hint of *Thunderqueen's* black ship there were those who wished heartily that the raiders or pirates would come or, even better, that the Jovian liner and all her people would go. The officers and passengers of the big ship were becoming altogether too ubiquitous. There is little enough privacy, at the best of times, in a world such as Ceres. And the four hundred odd people who were *Thunderqueen's* personnel seemed, to a certain growing minority, to have the nuisance value of ten times their number.

Alan Latimer was not of this minority. To him the days were packed with interest, and with the sense of urgency, of working against time. And Lauranne saw little of him in the brief periods he allowed himself for relaxation. She heard stories, stories that at first met with incredulity, that at last forced a grudging belief upon her. Always these stories featured the name of Ailsa Rae. Lauranne remembered having seen the girl. Slight she was, and red-beaded, with high cheekbones and eyes that were green. And she moved with a lithe grace that Lauranne herself could never hope to recapture. And while she knew in her heart that Alan was hers, yet she knew, with a dreadful certainty, that the coming

battle with the aliens meant for her husband the slim chance of pardon, of a new life that she was not intended to share.

These thoughts had crossed Latimer's mind. In his more optimistic moments he had allowed himself to dream dreams. And he had hated himself that his wife was not part of these same dreams, but the dreams remained unchanged. But in these latter days the thought whose urgency crowded all else from his mind was that he was not ready. An antic fate had made him Earth's champion in the first battle between men and aliens, and both armor and armament were sadly lacking. He decided that he would force a showdown between himself and Pemberthy, would demand to be allowed to inspect the progress made in the manufacture of the torpedoes, the arming of *Thunderqueen*.

He said as much to Ailsa Rae, with whom he was walking in one of the parks.

"But it is all right, Alan," she insisted. "I've been down to the engine-room and the workshops. I know nothing about these things, but I saw row upon row of plastic cylinders, each with its fins and jets at the tail. And they're setting up launching cradles in all the airlocks. It will be all right, I tell you."

"Perhaps, my dear. But I want to see for myself. And I want to have at least one round for each of my own projectors. If this black ship of Pemberthy's drops on us without warning and blasts *Thunderqueen*, I have no weapons to fight back."

"But. . . Oh, I can see it's no use arguing with you. You'll see the Old Man, and you'll have a first-class row, same as you did before, and you'll get nowhere. And. . ."

"Shut up!" ordered Latimer. He enforced his order by pressing his mouth on hers. And as she went limp in his arms he felt his resolve to

have it out with Captain Pemberthy weaken. He was doing enough. He was doing more than his share. Let the Boss dicker with *Thunderqueen's* Master—he was the politician.

CHAPTER IV

Cold-Blooded Murder

HOW long this mood would have lasted had it not been for the intervention of chance it is impossible to say. But it was the hard pressure of Ailsa's shoulder holster against his chest that aroused resentment, pulled him up from the pit into which he was fast falling. This girl, this woman that was his for the taking, was armed and he was not. It was an affront to his pride as a fighting man. It was unthinkable that a foolish merchant skipper should have the effrontery to provide his female passengers with weapons, and deny those same weapons to those to whom was entrusted the defense of a world, and more than a world.

He let his arms fall to his sides. The girl, taken unawares, staggered. And in her green eyes when she looked up at him was puzzlement and hurt, and a strange light that was neither.

"Where do I find the Captain?" demanded Latimer harshly.

"You should know," she replied sullenly. "He and Commander Wood are usually with your Boss at this time."

"Then I'm going there now. And Kimball had better back me up. Or . . ."

"Or what?" The voice was mocking.

"Never you mind," he laughed, matching her mood of light raillery. He clasped her to him and kissed her heartily. And thought that if this had been Lauranne the little scene would have been followed by an atmosphere of dull resentment that would have lasted for hours.

Somehow, as he strode across the

velvety grass, his spirits were light. He looked with appreciation at a tall, blonde girl, one of the liner's passengers. And he was not too surprised when he saw, a few minutes later, the same girl again. It couldn't possibly be the same girl, he told himself. She must be twins . . . And thought nothing more of it.

He returned the salute of the sentry at the entrance to Kimball's apartments with a snap that surprised even himself. As he strode along the corridor he found that he was rehearsing what he would say to Pemberthy. He repeated the most telling phrases, turning them over and over in his mind with relish.

It was not until he had almost reached the office that the sound of angry voices aroused him from his pleasant daydream. Angry voices? He listened intently. There was only one angry voice, and that was Kimball's. Pemberthy was speaking in his usual expressionless tones. And Wood appeared not to be speaking at all.

Latimer started to hurry. As he reached the door he heard Kimball shout: "I know! I know what . . ." And there was a peculiarly soft explosion, and a scream, and, when Latimer flung open the door, the sickening stench of burned flesh.

On the floor, in front of his desk, lay Kimball. Where his protuberant belly had been was a charred, gaping hole. The coils of the intestines, laid bare, seemed to have a life of their own, seemed to be writhing slowly and slimily. Latimer gulped. He turned away quickly. But not before he had seen the smoking gun in Wood's hand, the ugly weapon that Pemberthy was pointing straight at him.

When he looked back both Wood and Pemberthy were covering him with their weapons. They were, he saw, standard .5 service automatics, fitted with silencers, firing an explosive slug. And the hands that held them wavered not one fraction.

Latimer was not unarmed. He had his stout, metal-tipped stave, and the short dirk at his belt. Against two nervous inexperienced gunmen he would have stood a fighting chance. But these gunmen were not nervous. Such *sangfroid* might have been expected from two officers of his own late service, but hardly from those whose whole training emphasized the safe delivery of passengers and cargo, the safety of their ships. He, Latimer, had killed his men in hot blood. The only hot blood in evidence in this killing had been Kimball's. The two merchant officers were no more than cold-blooded murderers.

PEMBERTHY was speaking. "I am sorry that this had to happen," he said.

"You will be when you're sent out here to become a permanent guest," cracked Latimer.

"Let me finish. Your Boss, Kimball, was planning to seize our ship, to band her over to the invaders that he will—would—insist on regarding as Terran pirates. We quarreled. He drew a knife. Commander Wood was obliged to fire in self-defense."

"What did Kimball know?" demanded the Inspector.

There was a little silence. Then Wood permitted himself the luxury of a mirthless smile.

"He thought that he knew that the ship that attacked us was manned by Terran pirates . . ."

"Another thing, you've said that you could not spare us arms. But even your women are packing guns."

"We should, perhaps, have been more frank. Put yourself in our place, Latimer. As far as we are concerned this place may be more dangerous than the jungles of Venus. Are we to deprive ourselves and our charges of all protection?"

"No," admitted Latimer slowly. "But the alliance between us—if you can call it such—has been far too one-

sided. You and your people have been given the freedom of our world. And what have we got in return? Nothing but vague promises.

"Worse, you are supposed to be the law abiding citizens, we the criminals. Yet . . ." He pointed mutely to Kimball's body.

Pemberthy was silent. It was not, strangely enough, an embarrassed or a guilty silence. This the Inspector found strange indeed. He was willing to believe that the master of a passenger liner might well find a lack of frankness, a certain disingenuousness, very essential in the execution of his professional duties, might even, in time, become an accomplished prevaricator. But it is not so much the act of lying, of equivocation, that brings moral discomfort in its wake. It is being found out. But this was as nothing to the fact that Kimball's killers, men of peace, could view the body of the man they had butchered without the slightest trace of emotion.

"Let him see the ship," suggested Wood, his voice expressionless as always. "Let him see the ship, and convince himself that we are making his weapons. But first, sir, it will be as well to dispose of the body."

"Commander Wood is right," agreed the Captain. "Nobody need know that Kimball is dead. At a time of crisis such as this it will be as well if nobody ever does know that Kimball is dead. You, of course, will carry on as you have been doing; ever since our arrival you have been the real Boss. Kimball has been only a figure-head."

Latimer wanted to argue. He wanted to press the stud under the desk that would bring the guards pouring into the room. And, above all, he wanted to do violence to the two who stood there and to whom the body on the floor was just so much refuse to be unceremoniously dumped.

But . . . They held the guns.

Had it not been for the fact that there was nobody else on Ceres to whom the military command could be entrusted, that he, Alan Latimer, was, even though Earth did not know, might never know entrusted with the defense of the Solar System, he would never have let himself be overawed by the threat of the heavy pistols, would have allowed the tides of fury to sweep aside all prudence, all considered action.

But Ceres had wrought its changes. So, too, had the heavy responsibility with which he had been saddled. And he held himself on a tight rein, and the red haze never quite obscured his vision, and the drumming of the blood in his ears was never loud enough to drown what the others were saying.

"Well?" demanded Pemherthy.

"I still think that you're murderers. I still have to be convinced of the truth of your story. But . . ."

"Yes?"

"You give me no choice."

WOOD had found the cunningly concealed hutton in the paneling. He pressed it, and a circular section of the floor slid to one side. Latimer wondered how the strangers knew of the existence of the chute that ran down to the big fertilizer tanks. Probably Kimball had told them in a moment of drunken confidence. He had always been proud of this unconventional office fitting. But during his reign it had never, until now, been used for bodies. Bitterly Latimer reflected on how much better the Boss had been than his had and mad predecessors, experienced a sense of very real loss; of hatred for his murderers.

Wood dragged the gross body to the edge of the round hole, gave it a last shove with his foot. It teetered for a second or so, then vanished. From very far away came the sound of a splash. Kimball had always been proud of Ceres' parks and gardens.

And in death he would serve them no less faithfully than he had done during his life.

Pemherthy waited until his executive officer had removed, with a piece of rag, all traces of blood from the polished floor, sent the hideously stained cloth to follow the body. Then, with his gun, he gestured towards the door.

"And tell the guards," he said, "that the Boss is working hard, must not be disturbed. You can arrange to have food sent in at intervals."

You fools, thought Latimer. *Whoever brings the food will see at once that there is something amiss . . . But we're playing the game your way. All I have to do is to keep my jets clear.*

The two officers returned their guns to their side pockets. The Inspector could sense rather than see that he was still covered, that the slightest hostile move on his part would be the last move that he would make. They closed in on either side of him as they walked along the corridor to the outside passages. So close were they that he found it difficult to return the salutes of the guards.

At the last door there was another constable talking to the one on duty. When he saw Latimer he stiffened to attention, brought his hand to the brim of his helmet. The most meticulously Prussian military officer would have found it hard to lay his finger on anything wrong with the salute, but in it there was something of what, in all services and all ages, has been called "dumb insolence."

The man was Lane.

"Mrs. Latimer's compliments, sir," he said stiffly, "and will you come round to your apartment at once?"

Alan Latimer did not want to go. The memory of the girl Ailsa was too fresh in his mind, dreams of a future in which she played a prominent part were not lacking.

"That can wait," said Pemherthy.

"Oh, I don't know . . ."

"Of course it can wait."

And who the hell are you to give me orders affecting my private life? Come to think of it—you and your long, lanky sidekick are ruddy anxious to get me aboard your damned ship. There's a catch in it somewhere. But I don't want to be bumped off the same as Kimball. All the same, I'd better play ball, my way. Up to a point. Can't afford to split brass-rags when the alien ship may be on top of us at any moment . . .

But he said: "I think I'd better go, Captain." He managed a mirthless grin. "You know what women are."

"I think you'd better come with us," Wood stated flatly. No trace of emotion was evident in his voice, in his eyes, but Latimer knew that the index finger of the Commander's right hand had tightened about the trigger of his gun.

Latimer glanced about him. There were too many witnesses for a murder. In addition to Lane and the constable on duty there were three more policemen just coming out of the administration offices. And there were a half dozen of *Thunderqueen's* passengers, men and women, coming along the wide corridor.

It should have been reassuring, yet he had the feeling that Wood would as soon shoot him down in front of all Ceres as in private.

"No," he said. "My wife wants me, and I'd better go. But that matter we talked over in Kimball's office, you have my word that I'm in favor . . ."

The dull, expressionless eyes stared into his. Then, "We have your word?"

"Haven't I just told you?"

"Good. And as for your visit to the ship, some other time, perhaps."

That's what you think, thought Latimer. He gave the two merchant officers a perfunctory salute, strode down the corridor with steps that he tried to make not too hurried. And the uneasy feeling in the small of his

back persisted until he had put a bend of the passage between himself and Pemberthy and Wood.

HE HAD every intention of going straight to his apartment. He was curious as to the reason for Lauranne's summons, and he was grateful to her for having extricated him from what he felt to have been an awkward situation. Awkward? It was more than that. He became aware that his underclothing was clammy with perspiration, knew that he had experienced a fear altogether beyond even the most unpleasant and terrifying events of his past life. He told himself that this was because this was the first time that he had forced himself to stand up to a real emergency in cold blood. During his service career a recklessness, an unthinking bravery, had stood him in good stead—until the black day that this same recklessness spelled the ruin of his career and all his hopes. That's what it was, he told himself. But the explanation wasn't convincing.

He was deep in thought as he turned the corner into the corridor on which his apartment was situated. Unseeing, blind and deaf to all else but the problem in his brain, he let his feet carry him around the familiar curve. And when he cannoned into something firm, yet soft, something that said: "Well! Really!" he was taken by surprise and off balance, staggered and almost fell. If Ailsa Rae had not caught his arm he would have fallen.

"Wrapped in thought and clothed in haste," she said mockingly. "And hurrying home like a good husband . . ."

"Why, yes. But not too good, I'm afraid . . ."

The girl fell in step beside him. Latimer was walking more slowly now, matching his pace to hers. He was telling her his troubles, his wor-

(Continued on page 106)

By
BASIL WELLS

UNDER MARTIAN SANDS



"Jud, behind you!" the girl screamed.

When Jud Lee carried that helpless heiress into a Martian ruin, he thought he was saving her life from the Red Planet's vengeance. He never suspected that he was only carrying her across the threshold to a last world a hundred times more deadly!

The last great empire of Mars, a series of fertile islands in the heart of a shallow morasslike sea near the equator, came abruptly to an end sometime in the Dark Ages of Earth. Less than a thousand Martian years have passed since the red sands swallowed the Sea of Raha and its several score doomed cities and towns. . . .

It was in the last years of the empire that science reached its peak. During the reign of Raha Dagan, the Wise, scientists shook off the shackles of gravitation and voyaged in huge metal ships to the moons, and to Venus and Earth. The trading ships of Raha exploited the savage tribes existing at either pole, and her miners reopened long-abandoned mines rimming the dead sea bottoms.

Then, with the death of Raha Dagan, came the first of a series of plundering

Voldurians, better known as Toads, gray-fleshed, lumpy, four-foot entities from outer space. And almost overnight the Sea of Raha vanished. The hungry red sands, unchecked now, swallowed the ravaged islands and buried the domes.

To the north and to the south fled the survivors, there to huddle and mingle their blood with the dwindling savage descendants of earlier civilizations. Yet the memory of their vanished fertile homeland persisted in their legends and was woven into the intricate structure of their theism.

The dune-buried islands and dead cities became a lost paradise that was to be eventually restored to its pristine culture and fertility. . . .

From "Ancient Cultures of Mars"
by Redford Bly, published by
Red Planet Publ., Inc., 2001 A.D.



JUD LEE ran stubby brown fingers through his snowy hair before he let the pressure helmet drop back in place. Despite the laboring pressure pumps the air in the leaky cabin of the prospecting helicopter was uncomfortably thin. For the last three days he had lived, eaten, and slept almost exclusively in his pressure suit.

"Lopez!" he called as he snapped on the ship-to-ship audiophone.

The receivers in his helmet rattled in response. Have to check for loose connections or use the spare helmet, he decided. He bumped the transparent face-plate with a hooded wrist and the voice cleared.

"... speaking."

"Almost in the heart of Raha De-

pression," he said, his eyes continuing their endless sweep of the desolate dunes and ridged hollows. "No sign of water or desert growth. Two ruined cities off to the north. One just ahead."

"No luck here either." Vincent Lopez's voice was unsteady. "We have but a week remaining, my friend."

"If we could only blast the Toads out of the northern canals, we'd have water in plenty. Ten cruisers from Earth would do the trick. But we do nothing. Let them force us off Mars or use all our profits buying water!"

"Si," agreed Lopez bitterly, "but the Rhett Peace Pact says no. For no longer raiding Venus and Earth, we give the northland of Mars to the invaders."

"South Mars Limited maybe had a

finger in the pie. Their polar waterways are free of grafting Voldurians."

Lopez grunted assent. "Reminds me—seen anything of that SML passenger liner reported missing yesterday?"

"Nope. Uh, wait a minute. Something down here. Outcrop of rock maybe, or a building. . . .

"Dropping down to a hundred feet. . . . Uh, oh! It's the ship all right. Half buried in a dune and shattered. Must have exploded."

"What's your position, Jud?" Lee snapped back the readings, easing the heli down toward the base of the marching dune.

"Stepping out to look her over, Lopez. Stand by."

"Heading for you. Visibility almost zero. Sandstorm kicking up." Lopez snapped out something in disgusted Spanish.

"Not bad here. Better climb above it. So long."

Lee took his featherweight sand spade and left the heli's cabin on the side opposite the stiff southern breeze. He swung to the left, around the swirling turtle-paced toe of the marching hillock of ruddy sand. Here it was more sheltered and in a dozen paces he had reached the twisted debris of the half-covered wreck.

He cleared away the sand swiftly. In two minutes he had wriggled through the burst-open cabin's wall. He gulped at what he saw.

A minute later he was calling Lopez. "Five passengers and three crew members. All dead."

"Emergency call made it six passengers, one female."

"All men." Lee frowned at the slowly advancing wall of sand particles. The breeze was growing in power. "She may have been thrown free. Cabin split open like a nut."

"We'll radio from the base." Lopez's voice was strained. "Getting really knotty here, Jud. Better take off before it gets you."

The transmitter of the little Mexican partner of Jud Lee clicked off. The water prospectors and mineralogists of Northern Mars Incorporated always worked in pairs. And never at greater distances than forty miles from one another. So the desert storm would soon be upon Lee.

He took off, the sudden blast of thin air as he topped the dunes almost smashing him downward again. He climbed as fast as the sky prop's blades permitted. And his hands froze on the controls.

A pinpoint of light blossomed in the growing dusk of swirling dust clouds and endured for brief seconds—an emergency flare. Less than a quarter mile to the north it was. He headed toward it and finally spotted a pressure-suited shape kneeling in the shelter of a minor dune.

Somehow he landed less than a dozen feet beyond the woman. She came crawling through the blast of the sky prop and he yanked her into the cabin. He sent the ship lurching skyward, and, once clear of the sand, locked its controls for 500 feet.

The helmet slid from the woman's dusty head. He saw a tear-stained face and long reddish-brown hair. Her eyes were big, blue and staring with the terror she had known. Lee took in the flabby cheeks and the pouting lips and did not like what he saw.

"I'm thirsty," she said. "Give me some water."

Lee held a water flask for her and pushed her hands away after the first swallows. "Uh, uh," he said.

"Give me that water, Grandpa," she snarled weakly at him. "My father'll put you back at mining if you don't."

"Your father will?" Lee laughed.

"And who's he?"

"Commander Banton, you fool! Now give me that drink."

Lee stuffed the flask into his pressure suit's zippered belly pouch. He snapped on the transmitter, calling Lopez again. Between calls for his

comrade he studied his unwelcome passenger.

"So you're 'Louse' Banton," he mused. "Worst spoiled brat on Mars. And from South Mars, too!"

"My name is Lois!" the girl fairly screamed, "and I am not a brat!"

"Shut up," ordered Lee abruptly. "Yeah, this's Lee. You okay, Lopez? Great. . . ."

"Got the girl. Jet-happy little dame left the wreck and started off on foot! Honest. . . . Banton's daughter. . . ."

Lois slapped at Lee's tough pressure mask and he held her off with one hand, grinning sourly at her gasping ragc.

"Meet you at base," he concluded, "in an hour or so."

HALF AN HOUR later he was not so sure he'd make the base. He was making no headway against the raging torrent of sand-laden atmosphere; in fact he guessed he was losing the battle, and the battered heli's cabin was slowly wrenching apart at its welded seams.

Once he'd climbed to four thousand feet, to find the wind yet more turbulent there. Cross currents of air had tossed the little mapping ship about and forced him groundward. And the power of the hurricane had kept growing.

Both he and the Banton girl were strapped into their seats as the heli slammed about crazily. Abruptly the controls went lifeless in his hands. Something had given way. Helplessly, they were carried before the storm. The instruments were crazy, here in the Raha Depression they were far below the arbitrary sea level as it was, and now they could not be read correctly.

"May crash any minute, Lopez!" Lee shouted through his throat mike.

Uselessly, Lopez's faint voice was requesting his position, but before Lee could answer, the crash came. A freakish swirl of the sand-laden air

slowed the ship momentarily, and it dropped like a rock. There was a brutal snapping impact, and then a blackness the storm could not equal.

After a time Lee was conscious of the cutting blast of air that probed through a great split in the top of the cabin. Only now the roof was in front of him. There was the taste of salty blood in his mouth. And he was no longer strapped in the control chair.

Clumsily he groped to the locker where the protective sand masks were stored and took out two of them. One he slipped over his pressure helmet and the other he took to the girl's sprawled body.

"Keep your filthy paws off me," she snarled savagely. His audiophones rattled. Her breath gurgled unevenly.

She clawed at his hands, but he persisted in his task of strapping on the mask, and an extra belt of water flasks and oxygen cylinders. She was only semi-conscious, and he was forced to carry her toward the gaping rent. Only then did complete understanding return to her.

"What—where are we going?" she demanded pettishly.

"Have to start off on foot, look for a deserted city or other shelter."

Lois Banton laughed nastily. "Hah! You laughed at my ignorance in leaving the wrecked flyer. And now you do the same."

Lee shrugged. "Sure. You crashed in comparatively decent weather. The wreckage remained exposed. But in five minutes, ten feet of sand may bury the heli. The dunes build swiftly in such a hurricane."

The girl gazed fearfully at the rising level of sifting sand over what had been the control panels. She fairly flung herself at the opening. Lee caught her sand boots just in time and pulled her back. Calmly he snapped a ringed ten-foot line of tough nylon into her belt and into his own. Then he checked his sand spade,

pouched solar torch, and pressure-proof zippered holster where his compact machine-gun lay.

"We could anchor ourselves to the ship by a hundred-foot line," he told her calmly as he set the transmitter for thirty-second intervals of automatic signals, "but we'd soon be buried too. Only chance is drifting before the wind."

Lois's eyes were streaming tears.

"But there's no water out there," she quavered, "and our oxygen will run out."

"Then we'll use the hand pumps on our suits." Lee was angry, suddenly. "As for water there is little loss, perhaps a pint escapes in a day from these suits."

He pushed her out the opening and followed swiftly, the blast of the storm hurrying them along. He caught a glimpse of the hell and a building ridge of red dust behind it.

THEY stumbled through a ruddy darkness that rustled and chewed at their tough pressure envelopes. They leaned back against the wind, their sand boots slogging mechanically along. The surge of the storm currents threatened to send them hurtling skyward, chiplike. Even the shifting ridges of the dunes offered little protection, and a moment's halt buried them to the knees.

The curved solidity of a wall jarred Lee back into realization of his surroundings. Time had lost all meaning and weariness had dulled his senses. He was astonished to discover Lois yet on her feet, her body flattened against the obstruction.

"Domed city!" he croaked, his throat thick.

The girl's teeth showed whitely through the begrimed faceplates of her sand mask and helmet. She was trying to speak but he heard nothing, the communication cables linking them had broken or his audiophone receiver had finally quit.

He inched along the slow curve of the vast dome toward the left, and perhaps a hundred feet further along found a ragged crevice in the semi-opaque shell roofing the dead city's dust-choked ruins. He squeezed through to a catwalk of spidery looking, but enduring, metal, and drew Lois in beside him.

Only five feet below them, the highest of the ancient towers and flat-roofed dwellings sprouted from the sand. Lee knew that their bases might be a hundred feet further down, perhaps more. Eventually the outer level of sand and the inner level would coincide. That this dome must have been less badly shattered by the raiding invaders of a thousand years before, he could well believe. Most of the dead towns were completely buried.

They moved to the right until the spurting spray of sand through the wide slit in the dome could no longer reach them. Lee discovered the phone cable was unlinked and reclippled the contacts.

"I'm going outside again," he told the girl, taking out his solar torch, "to mark our entrance. Then we'll hunt for shelter in the ruins."

He lengthened the nylon cord with another ten foot length, before battling outward again, and then, above his head, he burned a sooty broad arrow into the dome's crystalline surface. To the left of this he burned: LEE, in two-foot letters. And on the opposite side of the crevice he put another, longer, arrow.

This done he re-entered the huge dome and lay, exhausted, upon the hard metallic ribs of the catwalk. Lois was sprawled there too, mouth slack, sleeping. The effort to stand again was too great. He closed his eyes.

LEE WAS smothering, his lungs gasping for air. He struggled to an elbow and opened his eyes to a dust-swirling twilight. The storm had not eased while he slept.

The oxygen cylinder was exhausted. Stale air sickened him, and his temples were throbbing as he switched over to the spare tank. When that was gone they'd have to rely on the emergency hand pumps to fill them again with compressed air.

He breathed deeply and switched on the girl's extra tank. She stirred and sat up too. He grinned wryly at her, contorted features.

"Hard hed," he said. "Even sand is better."

Lois squirmed uncomfortably, stretching her cramped legs and arms. She stood up, looking out over the mile-wide extent of the dome's foggy disc. "Now what?" She yawned. "Any chance of rescue soon?"

Lee shook his head. "Not until the storm's over. May be a day, may be a week. Our exit's blown shut too, I see."

The crevice by which they had entered was sealed again, and a rounded ramp of sand led down to the dome's uneven floor. Lee led the way to this and slid and stumbled down it, the girl trailing.

"Might as well hole up in the ruins," he advised. "Maybe we can seal out some of the dust so our hand pumps will not clog so fast."

Lois did not reply. She had withdrawn an arm from her suit's inflated right sleeve and was munching at an oval bar that looked like candy. Lee jerked at her other arm, making her drop the remaining fragment.

"That's emergency ration," he said sternly, "food for a week. You're going to be sorry."

"Yah!" spat out the girl, grimacing angrily at him.

Suddenly she doubled over, her face paling and yellowing to a hideous green hue. For several minutes she was violently sick, the cramped confines of her helmet and pressure suit but multiplying the discomforts of a cramping disgorging stomach.

After a time she was better, and Lee smothered a smile as she glared at

him. He headed again toward the oval doorway of a rounded tower of seamless yellowed plastic, the same material of which the enormously thick skin of the dome was constructed.

Inside, a vast, high-ceilinged chamber opened. And here the light seemed to have brightened, perhaps because the dust cloud was thinned. Lee uncapped his solar torch, cutting its radiance to less than normal noontime illumination.

Vast murals, their colors bright and fresh and the glistening protective coating of diamond-hard transparency unmarred by the centuries, covered the inner walls. Lee blinked his eyes, startled, as he saw familiar animals and vegetation, not of Mars, but of Earth! And then he recalled the legends of the savage natives of the polar waterways, stories of great ships crossing to Earth and Venus.

One wall depicted scenes of Earth; jungles, seas, and cultivated countryside with hilltop castles and thatched huts of stone. One figure was that of a mailclad warrior astride a masked and hooded horse. Here was that proof that Martians had visited Earth during the Middle Ages, this and the relief maps just below the murals.

The other wall represented scenes on Venus, recognizable to Lee, although he had never been there. Frog-like natives, *Buttrads*, he saw, and the ever-present aquatic growth of *thidin* vines. The paintings were as lifelike and colorful as three-dimensional photographs.

"This must have been old Raha Dagan's headquarters, Lois," he said, turning to the pale-faced girl.

They were now near the further end of the lofty hall, where twin oval ports stood invitingly open. The right hand door opened into a smaller room, its walls also decorated with pictures. Lois stepped inside and Lee followed.

Sudden emptiness opened in the pit of Lee's stomach; it was like a long-continued drop into a mine-shaft. The

oval opening into the outer chamber gave way to a blurring succession of rock strata and black galleries.

Lois so far forgot her dislike for Lee that she clung to his arm in terror. "We're falling!" she screamed. "Stop us! Stop us!"

"Don't worry," he told her, "this is probably an automatic elevator of some sort."

As though to confirm his words the "room" slowed and stopped opposite another oval doorway. They stepped out into a dreary cavern of a room that was lightless save for Lee's solar torch. For another ten seconds or so the platform remained opposite and then it sank away smoothly into the depths.

Only a faintly luminous mistiness, smokily brown and falling steadily, was to be seen in the square shaft.

"Now what, vac brain?" demanded the girl. "We're stuck here maybe a mile below the surface."

"The other shaft should have a current of this same inert gas rising upward," Lee suggested. "Let's see."

They took the four steps necessary to reach the other opening, looking down into a vacancy like that they had just quitted. Lois laughed jeeringly. Apparently her stomach was returning to normal, and she was again her usual disagreeable self.

"Disappointed, Grandpa?" she asked.

Lois was possibly nineteen or twenty and Lee was twenty-five. It was his prematurely snow-white hair that earned this nickname, a freakish result of a glancing bullet in one of the unending affrays between miners of SML and his own company. He grinned. After all he'd called her Louise, first.

"Nup. Be another platform along soon."

A minute passed. Lois sniffed triumphantly. And then a bulky something came sliding softly up from below and came to rest in the shaft. Its

oblong entrance almost exactly matched that of the mysterious barren chamber.

"Going up, Miss Banton?" asked Lee. "No charge."

Lois shook her head violently. "No! Let's keep going down and see what's there. We might find a treasure or mines."

There was new respect in Lee's voice as he agreed. It took a certain amount of courage, or bravado, to go downward into the unknown when a way to the surface was waiting. Despite her words her voice had quavered a trifle at the end.

A moment later they were aboard a platform in the other shaft and dropping steadily downward.

THE PLATFORM cage glided to a stop again, its seventh, and a well-lighted corridor lay beyond the oval port. Lois went swiftly out of the unmoving compartment with Lee at her side. And for the first time he noticed how their pressure suits wrinkled and flapped about their bodies.

He tested the outer pressure by cracking the helmet valve. There was no escape of oxygen. Gingerly he sniffed, sniffed again more deeply—and tugged at his helmet until it loosened and hung back on his shoulder hinges.

"Clean air," he cried. "Air with the smell of flowers and green growing things in it! Moist air!"

Lois followed suit. For several long sobbing breaths they were content to stand there and suck in the heady fragrance of the thick air. It made them dizzy after a time, forced them to breathe more shallowly as they peeled off their cumbersome pressure gear.

"How deep would we be," demanded Lois, "before air pressure equaled Earth Normal?"

"Plenty deep, Lois. And the air is moist!"

"So what? Our domes in South Mars are the same."

Lee muttered something uncomplimentary about "Toad Lovers" and started down the corridor. For several hundred feet it extended straight as an arrow, a softly glowing tube of perhaps twenty feet in diameter. The girl hurried after Lee.

Their now useless pressure suits and helmets, as well as the useless sand gear, they left behind. Finally Lee spoke:

"Moisture means water, possibly an underground lake or sea. North Mars Incorporated wouldn't have to close its mines. We've been in the red for the past two years buying all our water from the Toads!"

"I'm glad they're not in our hemisphere," agreed Lois.

"Yeah." Cynicism dripped from the word. His lips uncurled. "Sorry. Forget you're just a brat. Shouldn't be taking out my dislike for SML on you."

"I'm nineteen," the girl cried, "and no brat! But most of us do feel sorry for your people in the north—the women and children, that is."

"Thought you'd qualify it."

Suddenly Lee halted and his right hand went down to the gas-powered pocket gun holstered at his hip. It contained a clip of a thousand blaton-tipped needles—each needle an explosive miniature grenade. Because the needles were expelled, rather than fired, the common term of *expoder* was given them.

A forty-foot section of corridor had lost its glowing coating, it lay jumbled and dull on the floor, and the slimy darkness of water puddled there as well. On the left a branching corridor, also in darkness, opened. And there Lee thought he had detected movement.

His hand fell away. He laughed at himself. How could there be life here in this long-deserted necropolis? Of course the weird elevator shafts

yet functioned and there was the mysterious light, but in other abandoned cities Earthmen had discovered vast atom-powered machines purring untended after thousands of years. At Port Bemis, his homedome, all the power they needed for lights and heat came from a single Martian power plant.

Carefully he picked his way over the debris by the dim light from beyond. He passed the intersecting emptiness, a smaller unlighted way, and then a scrabbling sound came to him. Probably Lois. He started to turn.

"Jud, behind you!" the girl's voice screamed.

His leisurely movements changed. He flung himself forward and spun about, dropping to his knees with the expoder jutting from his fist. He saw three dwarfish squatty shapes, heavy clubs upraised, almost upon him. They must have come from the unlighted passage.

And then the hand gun sewed its needles across their torsos, those missing the targets exploding against the corridor's wall. A miniature series of thunderclaps boomed along the way. But even as the echoes died away the last of his attackers fell.

Lee came forward warily, his solar torch at plus sunlight searching into the other tunnel for other foes. It was empty to a depth of perhaps a hundred feet, but it curved to the right and therefore he could see no further.

He turned again to the fallen men, discovering them to be dwarfed humanoid creatures, thick-shouldered and hairy, their teeth yellowed fangs, and with foreheads little higher than their bulging frontal sinuses. Two of the naked beast-men were dark-haired, and the other covered with matted, straw-colored hair. Yet among the native Martians of the polar regions, black hair was almost unknown; reddish-blond hair, coarse

and thick as fur, being their natural covering.

And the size of their chests, when compared with the vast lung cavities of the polar natives, was pitifully inadequate. They were warped, bow-legged, and gnarled, with the filthy skin under their coarse-haired covering whiter than that of Lois.

He returned to the girl.

"Better go back, hadn't we?" he asked.

She hit her sagging lip and her damp eyes grew hot. Her body straightened defiantly. Stooping over a dead savage she found his club, a knotted cudgel longer than a man's forearm, and lifted it. She moved past Lee. "Come on, Grandpa," she challenged, leading the way.

Lee moved up beside her, his hand gun in his fingers, and his eyes alert. Together they strode down the seemingly unending length of the huge tube. Foolhardy it was, perhaps, but the water-hunger that only a native-born Martian knows, burned hot in both their hearts.

Something of the man's excitement and flaming hope had touched the girl. In her eyes was the same overpowering lust for water, and more water, that rivaled mankind's earlier madness for gold.

LESS THAN HALF a mile the gallery extended into the misty glow of its inner walls. Then they came out on a wide ledge of stone, its outer wall of living granite waist-high, and realized that they perched near the roof of a vast subterranean abyss. On either side the ledge extended unbroken, an observation platform for the long-vanished citizens of the Raba Depression.

"This must have been a zoological garden, a living museum of Earth," whispered Lois softly.

The cavern floor, a thousand feet below, was almost five miles in length and half as wide. And three-fourths

of its area was island-rimmed water!

Directly beneath them a grassy miniature tableland sprouted oddly familiar structures of stone—castles and crazily constructed little huddles of thatched huts. The castles, four in all, were in ruins, but about the last of them to the right, two-legged figures were moving. There, too, were a few patches of tilled ground with rowed dottings of cultivated green.

And rimming the lake, basking in the all-pervading glow of light similar to that of the corridor, lifted a mighty tangled forest of familiar, and unfamiliar, trees.

"Those wild men were Earthmen!" Lee moved slightly away from the girl's too-obvious nearness. "I thought their structure was decidedly unMartian, too-slight lung capacity."

"Must be old King Raba Dagan had quite a zoo." Lois lolled on the rocky parapet's flat top and studied the scene below. "Suppose there's another cave like this for Venusian fauna and stuff?"

Lee massaged a knuckle thoughtfully. He nodded. "Uh huh. Those murals, those paintings, were advertising the wonders of the strange life imprisoned here.

"This is a paradise, though. All this water. Means NMI won't have to close down after all."

Lois's laugh was nasty. "If we can get topside, yes. Don't forget the sand has covered the opening and your signal is buried. We may be trapped here forever."

"I hope not. Probably by now Lopez is starting to hunt for us. Or soon will be. And the crack in the dome may be uncovered again."

"Isn't it thrilling, though, Gramp?" giggled Lois. "We're like castaways—Adam and Eve in a garden—Harveth and Elise on Luna."

"Martian hill-dog and a desert cat in a bag more likely," said Lee dryly. "And we're not alone, either. Look, coming."

She turned to look in the direction his hand gun indicated, to the left. They saw a tall, broad-shouldered man, his thick black beard like a mane down across his hairy chest, and an ancient explosive-type rifle in his hand. His only garment was a rough, but effective, swathing of animal hide about his hips. He was less than twenty feet from them and the small black eye of the rifle was upon them.

Behind the savage-appearing creature clustered a dozen of the twisted dwarfs, more beasts than men, that they had already encountered.

FOR A LONG moment they fronted one another, unmoving, before the stranger's weapon dropped away and his beard split to reveal uneven white teeth. His voice was deep and unsteady, the words blurred by alien pronunciation.

"Good day, sirs," he said, apparently mistaking Lois's golden slacks and brown jacket for a masculine outfit.

"Greetings, Thug," chirped Lois. She grinned at Lee's warning frown. In an undertone she demanded, "Isn't that a perfectly good caveman title?"

Lee grunted something about fools and their heads ending in two separate sectors of space.

"Hello," he said quietly. "Earthman?"

"Indeed I am," said the bearded giant, advancing. "We are all Earthmen." His arm indicated the motley knot of little monsters at his heels.

"But you are more recently arrived, eh?"

The big man grimaced his understanding. "Thirty years ago my father found this horrible place. He came from the desert after his ship was crushed in landing."

Lee's eyes were shining. "The first spacers landed about then. What is your father's name?"

"Grant Athley. He is dead now." He pulled an ancient pocket-watch of worn soft gold from a pouch beneath

his great beard. "One hundred twenty days and—almost an hour from now—ago."

Lois bowed her head over it. "I see," she laughed, "how you knew thirty years have passed. You couldn't miss seeing this."

"But you don't look to be that old."

The big man's eyes were fixed on the girl. He took a step toward her, hands clawed in a horrible, hungry sort of way, and then another. A ghastly huddling cry of misery and unbelieving joy wrung from his lips.

"A woman—an Earth woman," he mumbled. "Always they told me I must mate with the ugly little shea. But now G'Ash has a woman."

Lois backed away uncertainly, getting behind Lee. Lee grimaced with distaste, but held his ground.

"My woman," he said. "Sorry."

"Then I must fight you for her." The big savage dropped his rifle and bared his teeth. Then, in imitation of Lee, "sorry."

Lee shook his head. "The little hes may fight so over their women. Not so real Earthmen. They let the woman choose."

The bearded man scratched his shaggy head. His beard again covered his teeth. He grunted grudging assent, but he continued to regard Lois hungrily. Lee knew the truce would not last.

"My father married a little she," he told Lee and the girl. He pointed down into the cavern valley toward the castle with the cultivated fields. "Mine," he added proudly, "you come there, please?"

"How many of the dwarf-men are there?" Lee wanted to know as they studied the valley.

G'Ash fiddled with his huge splayed fingers, his lips moving as he counted laboriously and silently.

"Maybe sixty-one, sixty-two or three, perhaps. Some have rebelled and hide in the forests or in the valley of the Frog People."

Lee nodded. "The Venusians. Where does it open off this valley?"

G'Ash indicated the dark opening at the left-hand end of the valley. "There," he said savagely. "Some day I will lead my people into it again."

"Are there other valleys, more lakes?"

The bearded man grunted. "At other end of the cavern. But all is water there, and the light is bad, almost gone. Also huge swimming things fill the water."

Lee looked at Lois, and then, meaningly, down into the cavern. She shook her head slightly. He turned to G'Ash.

"We must return to our friends," he said, extending his hand, "but we will return again soon."

The big man scowled, but he took Lee's hand. Suddenly he jerked the flyer toward him and his other fist crunched into Lee's jaw. A second blow landed on his temple and he felt his legs crumpling under him. Feebly he struggled to strike back, to reach his expoder.

He heard Lois screaming, and he saw the pipestem crooked legs of the degenerate warriors about him, with the last fading senses. Then cool stone was crushing his lips and nose and he knew no more.

HE WAS PENNED in a time-weathered dungeon, light seeping through yard-thick walls of masonry, and silvering the cobwebs festooning the falls and ceilings. His bed was a heap of mildewed weeds and reeds on a low stone platform, and in the cell's center a tiny spring bubbled up. From this a tiny rill crossed the rocky floor and vanished into a gaping cavity wider than a man's skull.

Lee went to the narrow slit of the single window, standing on a heap of debris to do so. He looked out over the weedy patches of cultivated ground, and saw the willow-grown

border of the lake. In the garden plots misshapen little women worked, their naked flesh a hideous, fish-belly white. And grotesque little dogs played with unsmiling tiny children upon the uncult grass between the gardens.

The inbred, simple-minded inhabitants of this hidden Eden beneath the ruddy desert, never laughed, and Lee, only once, heard their unintelligible speech raised in a broken sort of song. The proud knights and their humble serfs, brought here from Earth, had fallen far from their early estate.

Lee tested the walls, searching for loose masonry that could be removed. He tried the warped metal door, and found it to be strengthened by a second sturdy gate of interlocked logs and branches. Last of all he examined the ceiling, a dozen feet overhead, and found it had suffered least of all in the passing years.

His only hope of escape seemed to be through the opening cut into the walls by the spring's overflow, and toward this he started to move. But a sound of shuffling feet in the corridor beyond arrested his steps and he faced the doorway. The overlooked clip of needles was worthless as a weapon.

G'Ash stood in the doorway, a fire-blackened lump of flesh, its white-jointed bone protruding, in his left hand. In his other fist was Lee's needle-expelling hand gun. He tossed the hunk of meat at Lee.

"Your woman fled from me," he complained, his forehead wrinkled. "She hides in the forest beside the lake with the rebellious people."

"Good for her," said Lee. "I told you we Earthlings allow the women to choose."

"You must summon her," ordered G'Ash. "Then when she is close I can capture her."

"Go in a vacuum," Lee told him. He gnawed at a huge mouthful of the underdone meat.

"You refuse?" G'Ash took a threatening step forward.

Lee gave the bone and most of the meat back to the bearded giant—in the teeth! He followed the hurled missile with his fists and the weight of his tough sand boots. But the big man weathered the storm easily. One big hand seized Lee and hurled him, stunned, against the further wall of the dungeon.

He paused only to pick up the misused joint of meat.

"When you grow hungry," he roared, "you will be glad to call your woman for me."

Lee felt the numbness leaving his battered flesh. He made no sign he knew G'Ash was about. Instead he began masticating the mouthful of meat he had retained.

The bearded savage growled and lunged off along the corridor beyond. And as his footsteps grew inaudible Lee came to his hands and knees and crawled over to the spring to drink. Then, despite the pain that every movement brought, he lowered himself into the water-slimed cavity where the little rill disappeared.

His feet found a footing on a narrow ledge; then his elbows locked him in the narrowness of the crooked channel as he slowly descended. Once he stuck fast and for perhaps twenty minutes hung there with the falling water saturating and chilling his coveralls and the garments beneath.

Then cloth ripped along his back and he was precipitated suddenly downward about eight feet into a thigh-deep pool with a slimy mud bottom. He groped about in the icy depths, his solar torch gone along with his hand gun, and came up a gradual slope of possibly twenty feet in all, to a waterless expanse of rock.

The echoes, hollow and booming, of his boots on the rocky floor, informed him that he was inside a lower cavity of considerable area. He groped along the edge of the pool, found

where it overflowed, and followed the escaping thread of water.

He squeezed through narrow slits in the rocky walls and traversed vast chambers where a faint rippling play of electricity revealed inky pools and lakes. He heard splashings that only living things could make, and he armed himself as best he could with a keen-edged splinter of rock twice as large as his palm. In the depths, darting trails of pale light marked the passage of the watery denizens.

Three times he slept, his cramped limbs and aching muscles awakening him before he was rested. He was hungry, his stomach crying out for the food that successfully evaded his attempts to scoop it from the growing bitterness of the cavern pools.

Then came the moment when he wriggled upward through a narrowing slot of dank rock above the gurgling rush of piled-up water. And saw light ahead!

Once beyond the narrowing of the walls he hobbled along a widening ledge for a hundred yards—and emerged through a trailing curtain of Venusian *thidin* vines, and lacy, crimson-hued swamp air, into a watery valley yet larger than that of the Earthmen.

Floating islands of *thidin* dotted the foggy surface of the steaming lake, and along the narrow shoreline the fruit-heavy bushes of the *nik-nik* clustered. Their orange-hued husks were specked scarlet.

Lee ate the ripe fruit, the faded globes of brown with the enlarged splotches of red, as slowly as his hunger permitted. Nor did he have his fill of the crisp salmon-hued pulp and its thumb-sized black seeds when he reluctantly pushed off into the pale jungle.

HE SLEPT once before he discovered the linking passageway with the Earth cavern. It was near the mile-high arch of the cavern's

roof and led upward. A well-worn trail had grooved the stubborn surface of rock to a depth of an inch.

In the Venusian cavern he had only once seen a noseless, gray-hued Frog. And that lop-eared aborigine had been paddling a living raft of *thidin* out in the lake. Of the Earthmen reputed to have taken refuge in the lower valley he saw not a sign.

He emerged, hours later, into a tree-roofed tunnel piercing the forest. He had taken but a dozen steps along this narrow way, when a tangle of vines and braided ropes of hide and grass, fell about him.

He struggled despairingly, his keen-edged stone slashing madly. Yet for every strand he severed, two or three more nooses fell about him. At last he lay helpless.

Three of the crooked beast-men of the lost cavern gathered about him, prancing proudly, and thumbing the points of their rusty dagger-like knives suggestively. And then a pleased gurgle of laughter made him turn his head in the other direction.

Lois Banton bent over him and began loosing the cocoon of ropes. She had changed greatly in the short time they had been apart, and Lee wondered if perhaps more than four or five days by Martian reckoning, had passed. For under her flapping ragged garments the muscles moved lithely, and the superfluous flesh had melted from her face.

"Have you loose in a minute," she said. "O'Lar, you and K'Tton help me. B'Ron can keep watch."

"Glad you're still free," grunted Lee. And was amazed to discover that he really meant it.

"We've been trying to locate you," said Lois. "But this eternal dayshine is bad. Only at the sleeping hour did we dare venture from the forests."

The last of the ropes fell away and Lee stood up. He saw now that Lois had an ancient-looking, cross-hilted sword in a clumsy scabbard of dried

black leather, and that two of the squat, club-armed hunters wore floppy sleeveless jerkins of battered chain mail.

"Found the armory of one castle," explained Lois, noting his curious gaze. "Never did get to rescue you, though. Our friend with the beard kept a guard posted." She cocked an eyebrow. "How'd you do it?"

Lee explained his escape. She nodded.

"I've been in the other cavern once. Frogs aren't friendly any more since O'Lar"—she indicated the largest of the three renegade dwarfs—"refused to let them eat his woman."

"They understand English then and speak it!"

Lois grinned in a superior fashion. "Naturally. Ashley tried to teach them modern English among other things. He was horribly crippled, often lay helpless for weeks. Result of spacer's crash. So his brief attempts at schooling them accomplished little."

Lee dug into his inner pockets, his hand emerging at last with the useless clip of biaton needles for his captured hand gun. He showed them to the girl.

"If you'll let me have that dagger," he said, pointing to the blade she carried thrust through her sword-belt, "I'll try manufacturing a bomb."

Lois handed it over reluctantly. "Needles are dangerous to tinker with, aren't they?" she demanded.

"Uh huh. But we can't cut our way through to the dome-lifts with just clubs and a sword. Not against an expoder and a high-powered rifle."

Lee seated himself beside the trail, and, motioning the others away, set to work on the delicate task of exposing the metal-encased pinpoint of explosive biaton at the tip of three needles. In his hand gun the razor-edged trimmer key armed the needles only as they were expelled, to explode upon contact with anything

more substantial than air. But this way he was holding in his hands a death more susceptible than nitroglycerin to sudden jolts.

With sticky gum from a bruised tree he gingerly sealed all the needles into their clip, leaving the three armed needles projecting further. Then he looped a slender strip of hide about the deadly thing and ran the thong up and over a low limb, securing the other end with a loosely driven peg.

Directly beneath the clip of explosive needles lay a barely exposed reef of greenish-gray rock where only lichens and moss could root. Last of all he knotted another thin strand of hide about the peg and ran it, knee-high, across the trail where he quickly and properly secured it to another limb.

His death trap, clumsy though it was, was complete. Now he must lure the childish bearded giant into it.

Even as he plotted the man's destruction he could not but feel pity for the poor brute. Had the man been unarmed or alone he would have risked capturing him with snares, or even attempted to escape from the cavern without further conflict.

But he could take no chances on the bearded giant recapturing or killing them. News of this plentiful supply of the fluid life-blood of Mars must be carried outside whatever the cost.

G'Ash must die.

Lee started down the trail toward the castles and then retraced his steps. He tore the cord from the limb and knotted other lengths to it. The blank-faced beast-men and the girl regarded him curiously.

At a distance of a hundred yards, well inside the tunnel toward the Venusian cavern, he posted Lois with the looped end of the cord in her grip.

"We must be sure it is their leader," he said. "A wandering animal or

dwarf might set off the bomb. Can you do it?"

The girl's lips tightened, but her grave eyes were steady on Lee's.

"Certainly," she said simply.

TWICE Jud Lee showed himself briefly, he could not be too obvious, before G'Ash and ten of his brute-men came charging out of the ruined castle after him.

At first he ran easily, allowing G'Ash to gain on him, and then he was sprinting desperately to keep safely in advance. The prodigious bonnds of G'Ash put him far in advance of his hairy followers.

He passed the ledge of exposed stone but a dozen paces in advance of the bearded savage, a lead that was swiftly being whittled down, and then flung himself to the left behind a sheltering inky black boulder.

There was a terrible explosion.

He stood up at last, ears ringing, and looked back toward the shallow pit in the trail. He saw G'Ash weaponless and broken, his eyes and forehead a bloody mass of ripped flesh, crawling sightlessly toward him!

Lois had given the rope too late a tug, probably waiting for him to reach shelter, and G'Ash was beyond its full fury.

He ran around the blinded man to where the satiny metal of his hand gun shone and sent a burst of explosive needles over the cowering heads of the hairy men. They broke before this new menace, raced back along the way they had come.

Then he turned back toward the crawling bloody mass of flesh that was G'Ash, reluctant to destroy him, yet knowing that the man was better dead. In all the Earth cavern only G'Ash might lead an attack against them.

But the bearded savage had disappeared. Nor did a half hour of searching uncover his trail.

"I'm glad he escaped," said Lois.

as they climbed the winding ramps to the upper gallery and the lifts. "We have the guns now. In a few minutes we'll be in the dome."

"I feel the same," admitted Lee. "He couldn't stop us now."

They hurried along the shining corridor, the three rebellious beast men accompanying them, and Lee had time to consider the future. The storm would be long over now. He could tunnel out through the sand and burn outsized symbols on the dome. Then they could return to the depths until help arrived.

They passed the unlighted strip of tunnel, where the clean-stripped bones of the two beast men lay, and came to the lift.

Lee halted, his throat constricting, and the girl squeezed his arm sympathetically.

The huddle of equipment, pressure suits, helmets, sand spade, and spare belts, was gone! The dusty floor of the passage was empty. Where it had lain, the imprint of splayed naked feet was yet visible. G'Ash and his warriors had carried them off and they might never be found again.

In fact the curiosity of G'Ash might impel him to tear the suits and pumps apart, to ruin them hopelessly.

He looked at Lois, and her eyes were steady and calm. Like him she must have been digesting the knowledge that they were trapped here now for a long time. For he doubted his ability to contrive a workable pressure suit and pumps out of the crude materials at hand.

The thought of enduring her constant companionship was not unpleasant, now that privation and danger had revealed the real character that years of self-indulgence had failed to destroy. They'd quarrel, and she would insult him and bully him unmercifully at times, he knew.

She must have sensed what he was thinking. Wordlessly she came closer and lifted her face toward his.

"Break it up," a muffled voice sounded behind them. They turned.

"Lopez!" cried Lee. "How'd you find us?"

Lopez finished removing his helmet, revealing a trim moustache and handsome features. His smile was dazzling and all for the girl.

"This fortune-hunter making trouble?" he inquired maliciously.

Lee shook his partner's shoulders. "How?" he demanded.

Lopez waved an airy hand. "That? Nothing! Plotted direction of storm's path and your last position. Discovered dome, explored same, and here I am."

He turned again to the amused girl.

"Now," he said warmly, "you are safe at last, Miss Banton. I, Vincent Lopez, will see that no harm befalls you. There is nothing to fear. . ."

"Except you," supplied Lee, grinning. "Come along, Lois. Let's show our friend what paradise looks like."

Lois came to him, her eyes smiling, and they led the way again to the stone balcony overlooking the valley.

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OUT OF THIS WORLD ADVENTURES



Pushing past Mera, I saw Jna Lacho, the Napoleon of Space.

Jupiter Napoleon

Had she betrayed humanity's last stronghold to the conquerors from the Giant Planet—or had she sold only herself for a tyrant's harem?

By J. HARVEY HAGGARD



ERA! YOU SPACE gypsy! You've betrayed us, here in the Dante's Ridges of Uranus—the last outpost of man—"

I'll not forget her soon, standing there in the green rays of the twin moons, while above us, the blue ships of the Jovians, like giant malignant crystals, edged over the jagged escarpments and began descending.

"They're looking for me," she had said simply. "I was to meet them here."

She didn't look like a traitress. For that matter, she didn't seem to "belong" in the hidden chem-laboratories, though that was where her cunning little mind had wrought seeming miracles. Her face was oval, sweet and enchanting like that of a sprite, with

large blue eyes that melted my heart away every time she so much as looked at me. Even in the rugged garb of a fighting scout, her slender figure possessed an allure that was astonishing. For those same garments, on others, looked worn and ugly. A short kilt, a high breast vestment, with red celluline space boots.

I said, "Mera, you're crazy. Your brain's got the whirling orbits. You're coming away with me, whether you like it or not." I seized her bodily then, but she struggled, and her blue eyes looked into mine, and her tiny ruby lips brushed my own. "My darling," I breathed, but she protested. My muscles went to water—but I kissed her. Yes, there with the Jovians wheeling down like ravenous buzzards searching for carrion, I thrilled to the embrace of those soft, small arms.

"Not now, Jan. The Jovians are coming. Later perhaps, when that blue demon they call their Napoleon of space has ceased to plague the universe with his existence."

I looked away, following her gaze. She was staring at the towering heights far away, capped with eternal snows of frozen air. There were the last remnants of our people. Survivors of Earth! Last warriors of the human race, who had been driven here by the blue hordes of Jove. Their armada of fighting-crystals had swept down across the solar system in a seemingly endless array. Jnu Latha, their giant blue leader, had become a terrible legend among Earthmen. It was said that, having the strength born of a mightier planet, he had once met ten Earthmen barehanded, and had slain them. Jnu Latha, it was said, was immortal. And it was the fearful, hating Earthmen who had dubbed him the "Napoleon of Space."

"He's driven us from planet to planet, Jan," said Mera. "We're lost if we keep on fighting, the way we have done. And besides, I'm not betraying you. Just disobeying orders, remember—"

And there, with the crystal-raiders of Jove hurtling down like tangible thunderbolts, I did remember. Three days before she had come from the makeshift cave laboratories with an impossible scheme.

"Even a Napoleon cannot win forever," she'd explained. "We might take a lesson from Terrestrial history."

"We're outnumbered, yes," I had retorted through gritting teeth, "but Jnu Latha can be killed. I know he can."

"It was indicated," continued Mera, "at the autopsy of Napoleon Bonaparte, or so the ancient histories go, that his later battles were lost because of a failing pituitary gland. As its functioning lessened, lethargy and fat-headedness resulted."

"Then let's hope Jnu Latha's blue neck begins to shrivel!" I had exploded contemptuously. "Then three more wishes, cross your fingers in a magical symbol, and spit over your left—"

"But you can do the same thing with rays," she had protested. "I've done it in the lab, and I can do it again with a tiny portable lamp that can be hidden in my clothing. Its invisible waves will spray out and destroy the vital glands slowly—"

"And you propose to enter the camp of the enemy, train your rays on his glands, and wait until he becomes too lethargic to command his troops! Absurd. Before you do that I will have sliced his head from his shoulders with my sword. Don't even talk of such a thing."

She hadn't, but her little lips had set tightly, and now on the next scouting expedition she told me how she had communicated with the Jovians on an ionic-beam, promising to meet them and betray the Earthmen's whereabouts.

I whipped a dagger from a sheath, a wavering sliver of gleaming metal.

"You win!" I exclaimed dubiously. "But take care of yourself, Mera. Keep this for your own protection. You can keep it hidden. When you pin this blade in your garment the jeweled haft looks like an ornament."

She shrugged helplessly as I slid the blade into her harness vestment, leaving only the hilt visible, a scintillating crescent of precious stones. As a lethal weapon for protection it was now perfectly hidden. None would guess that it was anything but jewelry.

Then I turned and ran up a tortuous channel between high buttes. I might have remained, might have died fighting in vain. As the ogreish figures leaped in, I might have taken many blue savages of a distant planet to the hell-limbo they call *Kzhu*, but I would most certainly have been slain in the end. I am not afraid of death,

but somehow I couldn't think of it as long as Mera Thraddock was alive, a virtual prisoner among the myrmidons of Jove.

TWO KECALDES. The retrograde Ariel had circled the planet three times in its satellite orbit. That was the Jovian means of measurement for the passing time. Long tormenting weeks, as measured by Terrestrial clocks. The Jovians were encamped in the fertile floor of a huge extinct crater, while we of Earth were entrenched in mountainous grottoes, living on glue-bugs and those creeping monstrosities we managed to trap in the caves. Skirmishes were frequent during that time, but indecisive. The Earth Commandant gave the order to attack under the third saffron moon's wan rays during the late hours of night.

It was a slim chance, but we were becoming desperate. That night ten thousand rugged Terrestrial ghosts rose over the edge of the crater's maw and leaped silently downward. Fate smiled. The Jovian tribes had been overconfident; only the dominance of Jnu Latha had served to hold conflicting creeds together. There were but few sentinels, and these were so unwary that we overcame them with little noise. Then we were down among the fibre shelter-spreads, raygats snarling forth pacans of death."

We were like demons risen from the grave of the past. Madness surged within our breasts; we fought like supermen. History marks that day. No use to repeat an accounting of that. The blue Jovians, leaderless and unorganized, were slain like the cattle

they are as they fled in cowardly panic. But they did not escape our avenging beams. I led a detachment up an escarpment that teemed with blue warriors, and with those Earthly hellions at my back, we left a shambles along the terrace below the rich Jovian tent-furnishings of the warlord.

In the inner chamber I found Mera. She stood before a curtained hanging, and looking past, I could see Jnu Latha, the Napoleon of space, who seemed to be sleeping.

"Mera Thraddock!" I exclaimed jubilantly. "You glorious little spaceminx. Blazing Universes! That wild plot paid off at a thousand to one. You're all right, Mera?" She nodded.

"Even as Napoleon," she said, drawing the gossamer curtain aside.

"History repeats itself," I acclaimed. "It was indicated that a great Terrestrial general lost his leadership qualities because a gland failed—and now—and now—" It was hard to think of Jnu Latha, who had been so dynamic and ruthless, as a sluggard, a mold of human flesh, or sub-human as it were, held captive by internal secretions. But Mera was shaking her head.

I frowned, strode into the farther chamber.

The Jovian was not sleeping. His repose was more fixed than that. Upon his naked blue breast glistened a curious little ornament, a crescent of glittering jewels, nestled like a stinging bee.

A drop of green blood formed, dimming the sparkling hilt as it fell down upon the bare knees of the Napoleon of Space, whose darkening blue flesh was becoming cold as clay.



THE CITY OF SINGING CUBES

Burkeson and the men from America figured the interplanetary expedition in search of an invincible weapon was going to be a cinch. There was nothing to stop them—just a lot of silly Martian music boxes floating in the air . . . until Burkeson blundered on the key that unlocked the symphony from Hell.

By BRYCE WALTON



THE CREW was gone. Captain Ballance, and Lt. Dobson, and Clevenger and Ferrell and Hopkins, all of them gone. Burkeson sat in the rocket's shadow and thought about them; and, hearing the rapid change in the city's symphonic voice. Burkeson knew that soon he would go, and then the rocket would go. And after that—

His laughter was shrill in the thin Martian night, echoing against the rocket's skin, and drifting off across the red desert. In his laugh was a crazy climbing note of lonely fear.

That mounting thunderous destruction in the music of the city—what an awful difference, he thought wildly and stared into the shadows of distant city spires. It's all through the music now, the corruption and hate, and it's growing and growing, and we taught them—

The symphony's theme was changed, forever, to the horror that never existed here before the rocket came. Harmonies and sustained notes in the Minor were creeping in. The somberness of the key of G, the brutal sinister and gloom dramatic violence of C, and the sad agitation of E.

He wondered how long before it changed enough to be able to destroy him, too, with its hate.

It was funny, he thought, but that

first night, when we landed, none of us, except Clevenger, knew why we were here, but they sensed the purpose. And at first, no one knew what to do, and no one was aware of the music. . . .

FIRST, the necessary routine stuff. The testing of atmosphere, and the observation of surrounding terrain from the safety of the rocket's interior. There was the familiar Canal, the distant city, the barren mountains, dead sea-bottoms. And that was all. No eight-legged beasts or giant birds under the double moons.

Then they got out and stretched and breathed the clean crisp air, and looked at each other as though not quite sure they actually had arrived and were on the Martian desert, or whether they were merely ghosts of an idea.

They were spared the excitement of surprise at finding the canals and the city, for that had been observed and charted through the Palomar eye. Burkeson felt the music at once, but remained silent as he tried to analyze it. The others didn't seem to bear it. His hyper-sensitive and musically trained inner ear registered the sounds that were apparently inaudible to the others. A delicious alien sensation seemed to swim through him with his throbbing blood.

Captain Ballance, a blond, neatly



uniformed giant, stood and looked at the distant spires of the gleaming city.

"The big question is," he said, "—life." And the others were obviously thinking of that too. Burkeson's head was cocked to one side, puzzled wonderment in his eyes. No one noticed his odd reaction. Burkeson was an oddity anyway, a dreamer, an unrealistic sort, except in his specialized field of audio engineering, and electronics.

Ferrell, the atomics man, was sifting sand through his fingers and noticing that it felt much like any other sand would feel anywhere, on Manhattan or Long Beach. Lt. Dobson was breaking out a case of rations for a little celebration, though no one

seemed festive. Ferrell walked over beside Burkeson and Ballance. He also looked at the distant city. Its softly shifting pastel harmonies flickered in the moonlight.

"Beautiful," Burkeson whispered.

Ferrell said, "The question is, bow alien is life here likely to be?" His small fat body shivered, and he folded his arms. "Maybe we can't get along with 'em. Maybe they'll be super-intelligent, or savages. In either case, maybe they'll be so different, we'll never be able to get anyplace with 'em."

Capt. Ballance's cold hard face turned to the big neutron cannon mounted between the rocket's two skin casings. His voice was grimly final. "We're not worried, Ferrell."

Burkeson said softly. "But where would we want to get with them? That's the thing I want to know. There hasn't been any enthusiasm here like you'd expect on a first flight to Mars. It's all too grim! I want to know what we're doing here?"

"Why do humans do anything?" Ballance said. "Might as well ask that. Why did western culture expand, and murder primitives by the millions just to expand? Who the devil knows? Economics, instinct, geography, a complexity of causes. There may not be any general reason we're on Mars now, except that it's just a way-station to keep on expanding."

Clevenger came up with a bottle of beer in his white hand and a thin smile on his sardonic face. Clevenger, the North American Defense Federation Representative, whose presence lowered Ballance's title of captain to only a name. As a representative of the NADF, Clevenger was part owner of half the world, and his words directly affected the private and general lives of billions.

Clevenger said. "You spoke with broad generality, Captain. Now that we're here, and not just because our aesthetic comrade, Burkeson, has specifically asked for it, I think we should all know why we're here. Get any romantic nonsense out of your heads, men. This is business." He looked at the city. Hungrily, Burkeson thought.

"We're here to see if there's anything we can use," Clevenger said softly. "Especially in the way of—weapons."

BURKESON was sick. For a second, he forgot the strange music from the city. All this planning, and expense, and the dreams man had always had of going to the stars—the great black mystery of space, broken—and for what? *A better weapon!*

Oh Lord, he thought, what could be more horrible than that, more of

an indictment! He noticed that none of the others seemed to care about Clevenger's disclosure. A lifetime of militarized regimentation had dulled their imaginative faculties. This thing was routine to them! It was incredible to Burkeson, sickening.

He said, "It seems very quiet and peaceful, but it isn't. Can any of you hear anything? There's music, very muted and slow and much of it lost to our hearing because of frequency, but it fills the air."

He leaned toward the city. The others stopped whatever they were doing and listened. Perhaps they still didn't notice as strongly as did Burkeson, but as they listened, they began to hear shades of what Burkeson had been hearing.

For a while no one said anything, then Clevenger smiled thinly and arrogantly, and said:

"Probably got a big hand out to welcome us. Probably terrified at our landing, might even think we're gods or something. I'd suggest that we break out weapons from the arms locker, Captain, and trek over to the city and see what's what. The city actually might support some kind of life that knows we've landed, and are preparing a little surprise welcome for us!"

Burkeson closed his eyes. Oh, Lord. *A band!* His compatriots didn't understand at all. They haven't any idea what it is, this music, nor what kind of highly evolved aesthetics are necessary to create such glorious sound.

Ballance nodded the necessary orders. Two men remained to guard the rocket. The rest moved on to the city, armed with neutron rifles and revolvers, and one man carrying a compression gun firing atomic war-head shells.

As they approached the city, the music seemed to swell until Burkeson felt that he was breathing it. Ecstasy trembled through him so that he

could hardly force himself to walk on toward the heart of the sound.

He knew now that he never really had heard music before, but only the most awkward ignorant primitive attempts to create it. He had a vague and magnificent hint now of what music was.

But—it was too perfect, too big and too beautiful for human senses. He grabbed Ballance's arm so that the captain stopped and consequently the group stopped.

"I don't think we should go any further, Sir."

"What's that, Burkeson?"

"I don't think it's safe. That sound's the result of highly specialized development, Sir. It's a kind of perfection that maybe the rest of you haven't sensed as easily as I have. I'm trained for sound. I've a faint idea what mastery of audio engineering is necessary to produce a symphony like this. It means they're way ahead of us in sonic science, which could mean they're away ahead of us, period. They might be hostile, and unwilling to waste time in getting acquainted. I'd suggest that we wait and try to figure out exactly what we're really up against."

Clevenger laughed. Hatred for him and his egotistical laughter hit Burkeson, hard.

"What kind of so-called logical reasoning is that, Burkeson? If you're afraid, admit it. But we can't afford to. If there's any intelligent life here, we've got to impress them with our lack of fear, our superiority. And we've got to maintain that impression even if we have to put on a demonstration of force!"

Several voices shouted agreement. All the voices joined in with a roar of agreement, except Burkeson. Someone sneered at him.

They walked on toward the city, though more slowly now. The volume of delicate yet voluminous sound swelled. And inside Burkeson the

ecstasy grew with it. And also a hint of fear.

DELICATE RIBBONS of blue pastel highway curved into the city. There were no gates, no walls around it. There weren't any cannon on the parapets, nor any sign of armed men on guard. There is just a city, Burkeson thought, and the music.

"No trouble here," Clevenger said triumphantly. "If there are people here, I've an idea they'll be malleable. It's obvious they're not set up for any kind of defense. Probably in some stage of decadence. Civilized and progressive peoples are always set up to defend themselves against any attack."

The words grated in Burkeson's mind.

Then they stood in the center of a curving avenue in the moonlight and looked and listened and wondered. Spontaneous unease filtered among them. Ballance stared into the soft architectural beauty of the city, and had his rifle pointing into the purple shadows. Clevenger was analyzing what he could through his eyes alone, ignoring the music which was meaningless to him and the others.

He said. "I don't see any signs of life. Just that longhair noise! Maybe there isn't anything alive, and something's been playing this highbrow racket mechanically for centuries!"

Ballance said. "Whoever built this city was advanced all right, like Burkeson said. I hope there isn't any life here. Make it easier for us, I guess, to get what we need and get out."

Clevenger said. "They must have developed some pretty good weapons too. Any highly civilized race has terrific weapons. We'll find such weapons, whether there's any life around or not!"

Something moved past them. It moved noiselessly, gliding over the

gently curving walkway and into the purple shadows. Ballance crouched. Every man stood with weapon ready, tensed and waiting. Very coolly, Clevenger said:

"It was a cube, about half my height, wasn't it? It looked like metal or some kind of shiny plastic, same as the buildings. Wait, we won't follow it up yet. Take it easy. If they show us any signs of trouble, blast! Psychologically, we've got to show them their place from the start."

Burkeson gagged. He stared past Clevenger after the disappearing cube. As it moved past, the cube had glowed and pulsed with ever changing monochromatic light harmonies which, Burkeson thought, would correspond to the sound it was giving off in the form of music.

Burkeson knew that part of the great orchestration rising from the city came from this cube. It was an instrument. He felt that it was alive, that it was Martian life. He felt strange because he seemed to know. He didn't see how he could know.

He thought of a cube blasted with neutron rifles, that instrumental perfection exploding, and the coloration fading to corpse gray and freezing there while the vast orchestration over the city lost part of its completeness.

Weapons! Always looking for better and bigger weapons. Clevenger represented North American Defense Federation. The other half of the world, the Asian Defense Union, hadn't been quite fast enough, and NADF was on Mars first. Advanced weapons that would break the balance-of-power deadlock between the defense zones was sought.

Bitter hate hit Burkeson again and again as he listened to the swelling music around him, the peaceful stability of the city. He felt like a beast stalking into a patio, dripping bloody saliva over a garden.

Burkeson had never thoroughly

conformed to regimentation. And he had always expressed, in any small individual way he knew, his intense hatred for the prison militarism had made of the world. All-out defensive militarization had made people fit into the machine, regardless of their natural abilities. Burkeson was an audio engineer, an electronics man, and he had been a composer until the big draft. Since then, very little devotion to music. He knew he hadn't been adjusting any too well to his frustrations.

Everyone lived always with but one thought: wait and prepare because someday they'll attack. We must be ready. And the other half of the world lived always with but one thought: wait and prepare because someday *they'll* attack. *We* must be ready.

It didn't make any sense of course, Burkeson knew, because someday, no one had any idea when, the delicate balance of fear would topple one way or the other and—*poof!* But no one ever thought about that much any more.

It was always: invent a weapon a little more horrible and gigantic than *they've* got, so *they'll* be afraid to attack us. And so the weapons got bigger and more horrible on both sides. The only thing was, there began to be a limit on what innovations could be dragged up by physicists and biochemists and biologists and the fear-making psychologists. The point was reached where there was the search for one final weapon, capable of completely wiping out the others, without also destroying the entire earth and everything on it.

So come clear to Mars to find it, Burkeson thought. And he smiled, his mouth stretching taut like fine dark wire. And if we don't find the super super weapon here, go on and on, and explore the stars clear to Centaurus. Find something more super than anyone on Earth can create.

So they looked for the super super weapon.

And the only thing they could find was—music.

THE CUBES seemed to ignore them, or else didn't sense their presence at all. Communication with the cubes was attempted, and abandoned. Everyone but Burkeson decided they weren't alive. But no one paid any attention to Burkeson, for a while. His aesthetic philosophy was too unrealistic and introverted, they thought. But he did know his field very well, sonics. And they finally realized that if anything was to be found out about the city, Burkeson was the only one qualified to do it.

They moved into a large beautifully constructed hall in the heart of the city, with plenty of equipment, setting up headquarters for exploration, for testing or attempting to test the unknown elements of which the city was built. And always trying to figure whether the cubistic things that moved silently over the floors and along the shaded streets were intelligent, whether they were alive, or organic, inorganic, or semi-organic, colloidal. Or what.

They glowed with ever-changing color. And music came out of them, always. For miles around and beyond the city the giant orchestrations could be heard. And in the city itself the sound became something taken for granted and almost unnoticed. Except for Burkeson. He sat hour upon hour, eyes closed, listening, his mind reeling in clouds of magnificent sound.

Ballance called him in the next afternoon. And Clevenger was there to ask questions and demand answers. Clevenger sat with his feet propped up on a glowing cube that was conveniently not moving at the moment. As Burkeson came in and saluted, Clevenger deliberately ground his cigarette out on the side of the cube.

A piercing pain hit Burkeson as though he had felt the burning coals. The cube's coloration flickered with momentary ugliness.

Burkeson gasped. He leaned over and almost grabbed Clevenger's arm. Clevenger grinned.

"It's alive!" Burkeson whispered. "I've told all of you that. These cubes make the music we hear. This is *their* city."

Ballance said. "That isn't the question, Burkeson."

Clevenger said. "We need your advice. Looks as though this city is geared strictly for sound. That's your department. You mentioned that these people—you call them that—are masters of sound. Could you elaborate?"

Ballance said. "You mentioned to Ferrell about communicating with them."

"I don't know," Burkeson said stiffly. "Given time, I think we could. I believe they're of a much higher intelligence than we'll ever be."

Clevenger started, flushed slightly, and his fingers started drumming on the cube. "Matter of opinion of course. I'm a little too proud of being human to admit that. All I want to know is, how do they function? Alive or not, I'm sure no human will ever find any emphatic response to them, whatever they are."

"Maybe not," Burkeson said. "But it seems to me it should be obvious that they're intelligent, that this is their city. I think we could recognize them as being entitled to our respect. They didn't invite us here. This is their planet, their city. They've found a kind of ultimate peace and beauty we'll never be able to find."

Ballance coughed. "We're not interested in sociological problems now, Burkeson. We've taken plenty of photographic reels, and sound tracks. But we've found no machinery, no power plants. No evidence of atomic or electrical power. We believe the cubes contain the secret, but

so far we've hesitated about tearing one down to see what makes it tick. You suggested ultrasonics—"

Clevenger leaned toward Burkeson. "I know a little about audio engineering. I know our scientists have been working in that field for years, looking for weapons. Ultrasonics in solids. I believe these cubes are animated machines. My idea is that they're machines that can keep themselves going by hidden sonic power. That they're robotics of some kind, left by a dead civilization. What do you think of that possibility, Burkeson?"

Tear one of them down. Music like this—out of a machine—tear. . .

Somehow, Burkeson remained calm, and underneath, he wanted to kill. His hand shook, and he felt perspiration crawling down his face.

"I've told you my opinion, Sir. I think they're alive and highly intelligent. And so far above us that they may not even realize yet we're here. They're masters of ultra- and super-sonics. City and individual life here is supported by it. I think they communicate with each other by music, a small part of which is audible to us."

HE GOT UP then and stood so that the cube was between him and Clevenger. The individual instrumental music from the cube seemed to envelope him in a separate cloud of sound.

He said. "They've developed along much different lines than we have. My idea is that now that we've started exploring space, we can't keep on looking down on everything that's different than we are. Maybe these cubes are partly mechanical in structure. This whole city is structured for a vast communal interrelated ultrasonic life. I can explain something about what controlled and focused vibration can do to solids, what ultrasonic potentials are.

"But I'm afraid you would find it

rather technical. For example, the acoustic material of this city has been chosen and built so as to make the reverberation time the same for all frequencies, resulting in the loudness of all frequencies decaying at the same rate. The acoustic material shows a variation of absorption coefficients. In other words, they've done what our scientists could scarcely imagine. This city and the cubes are in tune, you might say.

"I think each cube is living and intelligent, and is also a part of a vast ultrasonic social culture, all working in complete vibratory harmony to create and sustain their own existence, to create music that's literally an endless joyous sensual life for them. It's beauty that our senses can't imagine.

"I've gotten an idea of what's been perfected here. These cubes can do almost anything through their control of vibration, that's the way I've got it figured. You know yourselves how we can use it for measuring, detecting flaws, in processing foods, drugs and chemicals, and as a catalyst to speed up chemical reactions. You know about the crystal type of ultrasonic unit that uses electrical energy instead of air as a source of power, and quartz crystals transform electrical energy into mechanical vibrations. Maybe these cubes operate on somewhat the same principle, infinitely complicated. I don't know.

"I know about all that humans have found out so far about ultrasonics. Which is to say, practically nothing. These cubes know everything about it.

"All I say is that I think these cubes are alive, and that they've mastered ultrasonics as well as the secret of living in harmonious beauty. Through extreme specialization, I think they've completely mastered their environment."

Clevenger said. "Very interesting speculation. Except that now we're

part of their environment. Say, where does all this humility come from, Burkeson? Don't you like being human?"

Burkeson didn't answer that. He could have. He could have said that during the last few hours, that question had been bothering him. He was uncertain.

Ballance said. "Anything else, Burkeson? About the cubes?"

Burkeson shrugged. "My interest in them is their complete mastery of music. My interest, as you may remember, was composing, before the draft. I can tell you this to illustrate their mastery of music, though this is only a small part.

"For example, to fairly represent even the crudest kind of music, the range of frequencies should be from 40 to 60, to 14,000 or 15,000 cycles. And the acoustic power range above the threshold of hearing should be from 0 to 70 decibels without distortion. Yet these people have gone so far beyond these ranges that my instruments are not worth anything. And yet, I can understand something of these people, and their culture."

"But it's completely *alien*, isn't it," Clevenger smiled. "And there should be no more hesitation about tearing these cubes down than in tearing down a highly specialized ant-hill to study it."

Burkeson felt his hands clench to wet fists. "I'd rather try to work out some means of communicating with them, learn their secrets that way. Maybe by subjective harmonics, and non-linear response. If you want that explained further—"

"No! Forget explanations now." Clevenger was on his feet. His face was drum tight with anger. "This is your specialty. We have only a few more days here. And regardless of your attitudes, we're going to tear down these cubes, Burkeson! And you're ordered to oversee the job!"

He breathed deeply, then said. "If

they've developed this fantastic mastery of ultrasonics that you say they have, then certainly these cubes contain the secret of some kind of ultrasonic weapon. And that would be exactly what we need to finish the Asians. There'd be no defense against ultrasonics. Specific vibration could destroy any defense. Our scientists have been working on ultrasonics, looking for a way to utilize sound waves as a weapon, for a long time. They haven't gotten anywhere. Why is that, Burkeson?"

BURKESON felt nauseous weakness. He leaned against the desk. He put out a hand and touched the cube, and suddenly a strange thrilling strength seemed to flow through him.

He said. "The difficulty is in narrowing the destructive vibration waves down to concentrative focus. Waves have a tendency to spread. If a way could be found to funnel the sound waves into concentrative focus, anything could be shaken to pieces, completely destroyed, by finding specific vibratory rates."

Clevenger said. "And these cubes should have that secret shouldn't they?"

"I don't—know," whispered Burkeson.

"Then," Clevenger said, "I think you'd better start looking into the cubes and finding out. The secret of one of these cubes might very well give us the drop on the Asians, enable us to destroy them all, and all their works. I'm afraid the NADF will hear of your uncooperative attitudes, Burkeson, unless you show a great deal of change."

Clevenger said to Ballance. "I'd suggest that you put Burkeson in charge, with Ferrell and Hopkins to assist, at once. We'll take several of the cubes back to the ship and tear them down. If the job seems too difficult, and looks like it might take too long, we'll take a cube or two with

us back to Earth. Whatever there is to learn is in the cubes anyway."

Burkeson was dismissed. Ferrell was sent to the ship after a small power car to mantle and bring back to the city for hauling cubes. Burkeson went outside into the cool shaded street. And he sat down beside a cube to wait. He sat in the shade cast by the cube, and buried his face in his arms.

Reality seemed slowly to fade. It became as though he were swimming in an endless sea of glorious sound, and that he was Orpheus, or the angel Israfil.

He had felt without knowing how. Now he knew. Their music was language, and he understood its broadest semantic meanings. He had always thought that if man would find a universal language, it would be in the realm of basic, vibratory harmonies that even in their crudest form had such profound and deep effects on the senses.

Chance didn't move Beethoven to select the key of E flat for the Heroic Symphony, Burkeson thought, and that of F for the Pastoral. It was in obedience to that mysterious law which assigns to each key a peculiar aspect, a special color.

There would be slight variations according to temperament and conditioned responses, but basically it was a physical law of general reactions. A certain vibration must inevitably have specific effects on physical structure.

Wrapped in that surrounding symphony of sound, Burkeson began to feel that he was in general contact emotionally with the cubes' mental world. Not with any individual cube, but with the whole interrelated sound structure of each cube and the city itself. And it seemed that as a result, entire emotional messages impinged on his nervous system, flooded his brain with understanding. It was a kind of ultimate method of compre-

hension, of evaluation, that one could term semantic.

And they were in touch with him, and their music was a language that he felt in great floods of understanding. And they understood his own anguished outpourings of feeling.

He felt the resulting horror as they absorbed his emotions. There was retreat, then more absorption, then shock, then slow horrified comprehension. Burkeson clutched his head suddenly, as if invisible hands were poised to strike. His body began to shake.

He staggered to his feet, screaming with pain and horror as their emotional reaction poured back upon him. He stood swaying, pressing his temples with shaking hands, his head rocking.

The pain slowly faded. He stood with his eyes closed. And then he felt the change begin in the music of the city. Major chords began to mingle and seek to establish themselves.

The doleful anxiety of A^b. The funereal and mysterious pathos of B^b crept in, retreated, moved in slowly to remain. G, sombre. C, brutal, sinister. E, sadness and agitation. C, gloomy, dramatic, violent. F—hate, hate, HATE! C and F. Hate, destruction, hate, destruction.

E^b, profound sadness of realization.

Then, C and F. Hate, hate, hate. Destruction.

KILL. KILL.

Burkeson yelled hoarsely. He turned and lurched back through the arched doorway; he screamed at Clevenger. He screamed at Ballance.

THEY straightened up quickly, and Clevenger licked his lips slowly as he saw Burkeson's twisted face. Burkeson started babbling. He screamed at them, insults and threats, but he wasn't making much sense, Clevenger thought. Ballance looked meaningfully toward the two guards

(Continued on page 118)

KENTON OF THE STAR PATROL



THE ATOMIC BOMBS THAT FELL ON HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI IN 1945 WERE THE GREENING THUNDERS OF THE ATOMIC ERA, CULMINATING IN 1962 WITH A ROCKET LANDING ON THE MOON. IN 1977, MAN SET FOOT ON MARS. A CENTURY LATER ON ALPHA CENTAURI, THE NEAREST STAR, BY 3750, MANY STAR CLUSTERS HAD BEEN EXPLODED. THEIR PLANETARY SYSTEMS JOINED WITH EARTH FEDERATION. TO POLICE THIS VAST AREA OF BILLIONS OF MILES OF EMPTY SPACE—TO GUARD THE TREASURE-LADEN CARDS SPACERS, THE STAR PATROL WAS BORN. DAVE KENTON WAS A STAR PATROLMAN. HIS HAND WAS ADAPT WITH SWORD AND GUN—HE WAS READY TO DIE IN ORDER TO SMASH THE POWER OF...

THE CORSAIRS FROM THE COALSACK!

FOR YEARS, A HORDE OF RUTHLESS PIRATES FROM THAT STRANGE BLACK BLOTCH OF SPACE HARKING WAS CALLED THE COALSACK SINCE 1960, HAVE BEEN RAIDING THE TREASURE-HEAVY SPACERS...

THE SCREAMS AND MOANS OF THEIR VICTIMS SOUNDED FOR A TIME ABOVE THE WHIR OF THE PIRATES' BEAM-GUNS—AND THEN SILENCE FELL, AND THE LOOTING BEGAN...

HEAVE OVER, BOYS!
WE'RE ALMOST
ABOVE HER!



SURRENDER NOW—
AND YOU LIVE!
FIGHT—AND
DIE!



ON THE TINY PLANET OF PLAYAL - HUNDREDS OF LIGHT YEARS* FROM THE EARTH - YOUNG STAR PATROLMAN DAVE KENTON RECEIVES WORD OF THE SPACE DISASTER.



THE COALSACK PIRATES-AGAIN! GOT THE ANNUAL METAL RUN FROM OEBBB! THREE BILLIONS CREDITS WORTH OF GOLD AND PLATINUM-GONE!

*EDITOR'S NOTE: A LIGHT YEAR IS THE DISTANCE LIGHT WILL TRAVEL IN ONE YEAR- MOVING AT 186,225 MILES PER SECOND!

JUST GOT MY ORDERS, SWEETHEART! I'M ROCKETTING UP* TONIGHT! SEALED ORDERS- TO GET THOSE PIRATES!

ONE MAN- AGAINST A FLEET OF SPACE ROVERS?



*EDITOR'S NOTE: "ROCKETTING UP"-A TERM MEANING TO TRAVEL IN A ROCKET SHIP OFF A PLANET.

THE HIGHER-UPS THINK **ONE** PATROLMAN MIGHT GO -WHERE ONE MILLION COULDN'T!

SOUNDS LIKE A GOOD IDEA TO ME. NOW-LET YOUR ARMS-SLOWLY...

YOU-YOU'RE NO BELL-HOP!

NOT EXACTLY- SWEETHEART! GET OVER THERE IN THE CORNER / TURN AROUND, FACE TO THE WALL. I WANT -YOUR PASSPORT!



NOBODY TAKES-

I DIDN'T WANT TO SHOOT- BUT I'LL HAVE TO..



I'M SORRY, PATROLMAN! THAT POWDER PELLET WILL LET YOU SLEEP... FOR A GOOD TWELVE HOURS! BUT YOU'LL BE ALL RIGHT...



TWELVE HOURS LATER, DAVE KENTON IS DRAGGED BEFORE A LIVED SUPERIOR OFFICER.

PATROLMAN KENTON, I OUGHT TO HAVE YOU RHYSEAMED OUT OF EXISTENCE! YOU LET A GIRL MAKE A FOOL OF YOU! SHE TOOK YOUR SPACE PASSPORT AND CREDENTIALS! SHE'LL PASTE HER OWN PICTURE OVER YOURS, OF COURSE...AND SHE'S GONE TO THE PIRATES WITH THEM!



WITH FINGERS THAT SHAKE WITH RAGE, THE COMMANDING PATROLMAN RIPS THE INSIGNIA OF THE PATROL FROM KENTON'S CHEST.

I'LL BREAK YOU, INSTEAD! DEAD, YOU MIGHT FORGET YOUR DISGRACE! ALIVE - YOU NEVER WILL!



FOR DAYS, DAVE KENTON LOST HIMSELF IN THE SPACEPORT BIVERNIS, WHERE GOBLETS OF SPICED PLAYALAN WINE HELPED HIM FORGET. BUT ONE MORNING...

BUSTED! I GUESS EVERYONE'S HEARD ABOUT MY DISGRACE. EVEN THOSE COALSACK PIRATES!



HEY! THAT'S AN IDEA! MAYBE IF THEY'VE HEARD OF MY DISGRACE - THEY'LL BELIEVE ME WHEN I SAY I WANT TO JOIN 'EM!



SECONDS LATER - AS A MECHANIC SHOUTS AND YELLS IN FURY, DAVE KENTON, DISGRACED PATROLMAN, ROCKETS UP FROM FLAYAL.

MAN CAN'T EVEN TAKE TIME TO GRAB A SANDWICH! COME BACK HERE, YOU CANARY-YELLOW IMP OF HADES! I DARE YA! I DARE YA!



ONWARD THROUGH THE BLACK DEPTHS OF INTERSTELLAR SPACE, ROCKET-JETS BLASTING A RED TRAIL IN HIS WAKE, DAVE KENTON HURTLES ONWARD...



AND THEN, ON THE RADAR SCREEN, HE PICKS UP THE FAINT SIGNAL OF A DISTANT SPACE BATTLE. MOVING SLOWLY, HE NOSES A PATH BETWEEN THE STRUGGLING SHIPS. GLAD IN A SPACESUIT, HE ABANDONS SHIP...

MADE IT! JUST IN TIME!



I CAN'T HELP THOSE POOR DEVILS THE PIRATES ARE AFTER - BUT IN THE CONFUSION I CAN LASH MYSELF TO AN OUTLAW SHIP! WHEN THEY GO INTO THE COALSACK - THEY'LL TAKE ME WITH THEM!



THE PIRATE SHIPS MOVE OFF WITH THEIR LOOT. HOURS LATER, THE SHARP NOSE OF THE SPACER ALDRE A PATH INTO THE BLACK BLOTCH OF THE COALSACK, THAT LIFTS AND PARTS AT THEIR APPROACH...



IF I COULD LEARN WHERE THOSE MACHINES ARE...STOP THEM FOR A WHILE...LONG ENOUGH TO SEND SOME SORT OF SIGNAL... TO THE STAR PATROL...



Above the vast landing fields of the pirate fleet...KENTON CUTS LOOSE HIS GRIP-HOOKS AND SLIPS DOWNWARD ON ANTI-GRAVITY POWER.



I'LL MIX IN WITH THE CROWDS. I WON'T TALK TO ANYBODY FOR A WHILE—UNTIL I MAKE SURE OF JUST WHAT GOES ON IN THIS PLACE...



AND THEN—SUDDENLY—AT A BUSY STREET INTERSECTION...



SHE CAME IN HERE I SAW HER! BUT NOW—SHE'S GONE!



ABRUPTLY THE HOUSE LIGHTS DIM. A PALE BEAM OF LUMINESCENCE CUTS THE SMOKEY AIR



WITH TREMBLING FINGERS, DAVE KENTON DOWNS A GLASS OF HEADY STRIPS-JUICE. MAEVE IS A FLAME OF BRILLIANCE, AS SHE DANCES THE FORBIDDEN "DANCE DIABLO"!

I DON'T GET IT! IF SHE'S WORKING WITH THE PIRATES-WHAT'S SHE DOING HERE AS A DANCING GIRL?



SHE SEES ME NOW... AND SHE KNOWS ME! AND-SHE'S SCARED!



AS HE CARELESSLY CATCHES THE SCARE, HIS FINGERS TOUCH THE CRISP STIFFNESS OF A TINY SLIP OF PAPER...

A NOTE! SHE SAYS TO MEET HER IN THE ALLEY AFTER HER DANCE! THIS COULD BE-A TRAP!



I'M SO GLAD YOU CAME! I SAW YOU FOLLOWING ME. I WROTE THE NOTE AND BROUGHT IT WITH ME ON THE FLOOR...

LISTEN SISTER! THE PATROL BUSTED ME ON ACCOUNT OF YOU! I OUGHT TO WRING THAT PRETTY NECK!



I'M MAEVE MALLOYS-SPACE REPORTER FOR THE STAR ROVER! I WANTED TO BREAK THE INSIDE STORY OF THE COALSACK PIRATE HIDE-OUT FOR MY SHEET, NOW THAT I'M HERE-I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO. I CAN'T GET OUT!



IN THE TEMPLE OF MACHINES THERE ARE ENGINES THAT THROW A **FORCE-FIELD** ALL AROUND THE COALSACK! NO SHIPS CAN GO IN OR OUT, UNLESS THE FORCE-FIELD IS LIFTED. AND TO GET OUT ON ONE OF THEIR SHIPS-YOU MUST BE A PIRATE!



AS KENTON AND MAEVE SPEAK IN LOW WHISPERS, A MAN'S EYES LIGHT UP GRIMLY AT SIGHT OF THEM.

AND NOW-THE WORST! I-I THINK THEY'VE CAUGHT ON TO ME. I'VE BEEN ORDERED TO DANCE FOR THEM, AT THE TEMPLE OF MACHINES. I'M AFRAID I'LL NEVER COME OUT-ALIVE!





WHILE THE ORCHESTRAL DRUMS THROB OVERHEAD, DAVE KENTON MOVES CAREFULLY ALONG THE TUNNELS OF THE LOWER FLOOR.



IT'S BALDA - THE PIRATE I TOSSED AROUND LAST NIGHT. IF HE SEES ME - I'M A GONER!

SECONDS LATER...



GOT TO SILENCE THEM - CAN'T TAKE - ANY CHANCES! THEIR HAND GUNS WILL COME IN HANDY -

GUARD BY GUARD, DAVE KENTON MOVES CLOSER TO THE MAN AND THROBS THE MIGHTY BUNNIES. AT THE ENTRANCE ARCH OF THE MACHINE ROOM, THE LAST GUARD DROPS WITHOUT A SOUND...



-AG BLACK-JACKS!

THIS IS IT! NOW TO FIND THE CENTRAL DYNAMOS - RIP WIRES - BLAST HOLES IN THE GENERATORS - SMASH THE DISTRIBUTORS!



AT THAT MOMENT...

PLUNNY! I'D HAVE SWORN I NOTICED SOMEONE OUT OF THE CORNER OF MY EYE! STILL...I WAS IN SUCH A HURRY TO SEE HUEVE DANCE...PERHAPS I'LL HAVE A LOOK BELOW... JUST IN CASE!



SPEAKING SWIFTLY INTO THE TINY RIBEL-JEWEL - HOPING THAT THE STAR PATROL WILL PICK UP HIS HYDROS, DAVE KENTON BLASTS WITH HIS CAPTURED BEAM-BUNS...



CALLING STAR PATROL! CALLING STAR PATROL! AM SMASHING FORCE-FIELD ENGINES IN COAL-SACK! YOU CAN ENTER! YOU CAN ENTER! HURRY! CAN'T HOLD POSITION LONG! HURRY!

THERE HE IS NOW! LET LOOSE AT HIM WITH YOUR BEAM-GUNS! MELT HIM INTO A BLOB OF CHEMICALS!!



I'VE FAILED! FAILED!
THEY CAN FIX THIS
IN LESS THAN AN
HOUR.

HOLD UP! DON'T
SHOOT!



I KNOW THIS SPACE-HOUND! HE LAID
HANDS ON ME LAST NIGHT! HE HIT ME!
NOW IT'S MY TURN! TAKE HIM BELOW,
TO THE PITS!



MINUTES LATER, DAVE KENTON IS
CHAINED TO A STONE PILLAR IN
THE TORTURE PITS.

I GUESS THIS IS THE END...OF
EVERYTHING! I'VE FAILED-MISER-
ABLY! BALDA WILL HAVE A
REPAIR CREW WORKING LIKE
MAD ON THOSE MACHINES-AND
THEN HE'LL COME BACK-
FOR ME!



HIGH ABOVE THE PIRATE
CITY, GRIM SHIPS OF WAR
SWING INTO ACTION. SILENT
EX-LOSO-RAYS BLAST
THE PIRATE SHIPS IN THEIR
LAUNCHING CRADLES.
KAYD BOMBS KNOCK OUT
PERSONNEL.

WE BURNED OUT THREE
ENGINES, SIR- BUT WE
GOT THROUGH THE
FORCE-FIELD IN TIME!



STAR PATROL RHY-MEN CUT
A PATH INTO THE TEMPLE
OF MACHINES...

THEY'RE QUITTING! AFTER
THEM! POUR IT TO THEM
EVEN HOTTER!



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, ALL FIGHT HAS
GONE OUT OF THE PIRATE RANKS, AND...

DAVE-I WANT TO APOLOGIZE!
I DON'T KNOW WHETHER YOU
PLANNED IT THIS WAY- BUT
YOU'VE DONE SOMETHING NO
OTHER PATROLMAN IN ALL
OUR HISTORY HAS DONE!

THANK
YOU,
SIR!



NEXT NIGHT ON THE STARLIGHT
ROOF OF A PENTHOUSE NIGHT CLUB...

WELL, CAPTAIN
KENTON-WHERE
DO THOSE ORDERS
I SAW SLIPPED TO
YOU YESTERDAY
TAKE YOU?

YOU THINK I'D
TELL YOU?
YOU'D PROBABLY
SLUG ME
AGAIN- AND
TRY TO BEAT
ME TO IT!



YOU CAN
LEARN
WHERE
THOSE
ORDERS WILL
TAKE DAVE
KENTON OF
THE STAR
PATROL IN THE
VERY NEXT
ISSUE OF-

STANGE
WORDS

DON'T MISS
IT!!

DEAD MAN'S TALE



IT IS PROPER TO BEGIN THIS DEAD MAN'S TALE
AT THE UNDERTAKER'S, WHERE..

GENTLY, GENTLY.
YOU ARE CARRYING
A GREAT MAN!

I'LL SAY HE'S GREAT! THE
STIFF WEIGHS A TON! WATER
WATER! YOU ALWAYS GET DEAD
GIANTS, BOSS! AN'T THERE NO
DEAD MIDGETS?



THESE SOCIETY BOYS
SURE BRASS FANCY.
WHERE WAS HE GOING
TO A MASQUERADE?

NAW, YOU DOPE! MR
MORGAN WAS ON A
FOX-HUNT WHEN HE
DROPPED DEAD..



DID GUY DROP DEAD?
DIS GIANT OF A GUY?
WHY HE COULD BUSTAW
IN TWO WITH HIS
PINKIES!

WHO KNOWS?
EXCEPT THE CORPSE!
AND CORPSES DON'T
SPEAK. WHO SHOULD
KNOW BETTER THAN
I?



YA AIN'T GONNA START
EWBALMIN' HIM TILL WE
HAVE SUPPORT? AW, BOSS,
IT'S A NIGHTG JOB...LET'S
GO OUT AND BUY US SOME
ENERGY FIRST!

SURE, BOSS...MORHAN
AIN'T GONNA EN
AWAY!

VERY
WELL!



BOY, DOES THE UNDERTAKING
BUSINESS GIVE YOU AN AP-
PETITE?...AM I GONNA TEAR
UP A JUICY STEAK?

DEATH...DEATH
EVERYWHERE. WHAT
IS LIFE BUT A
PREPARATION FOR
DEATH?



HOW TRUE ARE YOUR WORDS, MR. UNDER-
TAKER. HOW TRUE IT IS THAT ALL MY
LIFE I WAS PREPARING MYSELF FOR
THIS!...BUT YOU SAID THE DEAD DON'T
TALK, DIDN'T YOU?...



PERHAPS THEY DON'T...TO THE
LIVING, BUT THE DEAD THINK...
AND EN'T THINKING A CERTAIN
KIND OF TALKING? OF COURSE
IT IS!



HOW DIFFERENT YOU LOOK FROM THE
MYRON MORHAN YOU USED TO BE! IS
IT ANY WONDER? THEN YOU WERE
ALIVE...REMEMBER? REMEMBER
THAT SCORCHING DAY IN THE MOJAVE
DESERT TEN YEARS AGO?



YES-I REMEMBER
CLEARLY. I WAS A
POOR SALESMAN
THEN. I HAD AN
OLD RATTLETRAP
TO CRAWL AROUND
SOUTHWEST
AMERICA WITH...



"I REMEMBER PULLING INTO THAT LITTLE GAS STATION NEAR DEAD MAN'S RUT. WHAT A DAY IT WAS...I THOUGHT I WAS BEING ROASTED ALIVE!"

I THOUGHT YOU SAID THIS SOGA WAS COLD! WHY MY RADIATOR'S COLDER THAN THIS FOUL-TASTING BOTTLED POLLUTION!

CAN'T HELP IT, MISTER. I'M GIVIN' YOU WHAT I GOT. DON'T HAVE TO DRINK IT IF YOU DON'T WANT. WELL, YOUR CAR'S ABOUT READY!



LIKE SOUP, ISN'T IT?... ONLY THING MISSING IS NOODLES!

IF I USE MY IMAGINATION, I CAN TASTE THEM, TOO... (GULP!)



I WOULDN'T SAY THAT, IF I WAS YOU, MISTER... I ALWAYS KNOW WHAT I'M DOIN'!



SURE IT'S READY—READY FOR THE JUNKPILE!...

HEY, MISTER...DON'T THROW YOUR BOTTLE AWAY! GIVE US SOME OF IT...ME THROAT'S AS DRY AS A TEETOTALER'S GIZZARD!



YOU BEIN' SO KIND, MISTER—HOW ABOUT GIVIN' UP A RIDE? IT'S A LONG WAY I'M TRAVELING AND EVERY LITTLE BIT HELPS ME PURPHE!

IF YOU'RE WILLING TO RISK YOUR LIFE RIDING IN THIS BROKEN-DOWN VOL-CANG, IT'S OKAY BY ME. I CAN SEE YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING!



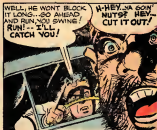
A HALF HOUR LATER...THE WORST HAPPENS...

CURSE MY LUCK AND CURSE YOU FOR ADDING TO THE ROTTENNESS OF IT! I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN YOU'D BE A JINK!

ME DEAR SIR, ME A JINKS WHY, I'M JUST A GOOD-FOR-NOTHING BUM, BURNIN' A RIDE....!







DISAPPEAR! I DISAPPEAR!
NEVER, MYRON MORGAN!—I SHALL
BE WITH YOU FOR THE REST OF
YOUR LIFE AND I SHALL CLAIM
YOU AT THE END
OF IT!

SOMETHING
WIERD'S
HAPPENED!
I'VE GOT TO
GET AWAY
FROM HERE
FAR AWAY!



WHO CARES
THAT WITH EACH
SWALLOW DIMINISH-
ING THE CONTENTS
OF THE BOTTLE, MY
OWN LIFE DIMINI-
SHES?—I WANT A
SUCCESSFUL LIFE,
EVEN IF IT BECOMES
A SHORT ONE!

DON'T WORRY,
LITTLE MORTAL...
WATCH HOW EMBIT-
TERED YOUR LIFE
WILL BE AS YOU SEE
THE LIQUID GRADU-
ALLY DISAPPEAR!

Meanwhile... I DON'T KNOW ANY-
THING ABOUT THIS...
WONDERFUL LIQUID... BUT WHO WOULD?
ALL I KNOW IS THAT A DRINK GRANTS
MY EVERY WISH!



♥ EARS PIGGED
AND WITH THEIR PIG-
GING, Myron Morgan
BECAME RICH,
POWERFUL AND
RESPECTED,
BEYOND ALL HIS
DREAMS...

HE MARRIED THE MOST BEAUTI-
FUL WOMAN IN PARK AVENUE
SOCIETY...



HE HAD SCORES
OF SERVANTS...



MAGNIFICENT
ESTATES...



A YACHT...



AND THE GREATEST
PRIZE OF ALL, HIS
LITTLE DAUGHTER...



BUT NOBODY KNEW THE SECRET OF HIS SUCCESS,
AND NOBODY KNEW HIS **SORROW**, EXCEPT
MYRON MORGAN!

LITTLE DOES ANYBODY KNOW THAT THE "SERUM"
BEHIND ALL THIS WEALTH AND POWER LIES
STOPPED UP IN A DIRTY OLD MEDICINE BOTTLE!
JUST AS MY LIFE IS CONTAINED IN A FEW
OUNCES OF ITS STRANGE FLUID!



I THINK I'LL HAVE A LOOK, AND SEE
HOW MUCH OF THE STUFF IS LEFT...
HAVEN'T SEEN IT IN SOME TIME!



GREAT GUNS! THERE'S SCARCELY
ANYTHING LEFT! THE LIQUID
IS ALMOST GONE!



THE CORK'S LEFT OUT
OF THE NECK... MY OWN
LIFE'S BLOOD...EVAPORATING!



I KNOW WHAT
I'LL DO. I'LL
WISH FOR
**MORE
LIQUID!**



IT DOESN'T WORK! NOTHING'S BEEN
ADDED...AND A PRECIOUS SIP OF IT'S BEEN
WASTED...WHAT AM I GOING TO DO? MY
LIFE'S AT STAKE!



I'VE GOT IT...I'LL DILUTE THE
LIQUID WITH WATER!



MOMENTS LATER, IN THE KITCHEN.....

I CAN'T AFFORD TO ENDANGER THE ENTIRE CONTENTS WITH THIS EXPERIMENT, SO I'LL JUST USE A PORTION OF THE MAGIC LIQUID AND TRY DILUTING IT WITH WATER, IN THIS TENSPOON!



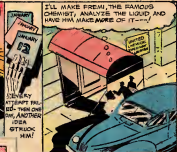
NOW I'LL WISH FOR SOMETHING SIMPLE, LIKE A \$1000... TO APPEAR ON THIS PANTRY SHELF!



NOTHING! DILUTING THE STUFF ONLY DESTROYS ITS POWER! ONLY THE ORIGINAL CONCENTRATE WILL WORK! ...IT'S THE LIQUID ITSELF I MUST GET MORE OF!



I'LL MAKE FREMI, THE FAMOUS CHEMIST, ANALYZE THE LIQUID AND HAVE HIM MAKE MORE OF IT---



SEVERAL ATTEMPT FAILED - THEN ONE DAY, ANOTHER IDEA STRUCK HIM!

UPSTAIRS, IN FREMI'S LABORATORY...

WHY, THIS IS A VERY COMMON CONCOCTION, MR. MORGAN. I CAN DISTILL OIL WELLS OF THE STUFF FOR YOU!

YOU CAN? THEN MAKE A GALLON OF IT, RIGHT NOW! I'LL COME FOR THE OIL WELLS, LATER!



IF THIS WORKS, I'LL BE THE WEALTHIEST, MOST POWERFUL MAN IN THE WORLD! I'LL HAVE SOLD OWNERSHIP OF THE MOST WONDROUS POTION IN THE HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSE!



AN HOUR LATER, IN THE DEN OF HIS HOME

ANOTHER SECOND WILL
TELL THE STORY! I'LL
WISH FOR A SILVER PITCHER
TO POUR THE MAGIC
FLUID!



ANOTHER FAILURE! NOTHING!
THE SYNTHETIC LIQUID LACKS
SOME ESSENTIAL SPIRIT WHICH
RENDERS IT MAGICAL!...

AW, DADDY,
PLEASE...
GIVE
ME
SOME!



DOWN THE
HATCH!

DADDY, WHAT
ARE YOU DRINKING?
CAN I HAVE
SOME?



ONLY THING TO DO IS MAKE
A CONCRETE CONTAINER AND
SEAL THE BOTTLE IN IT, SO
THAT THE LIQUID REMAINS
UNTouched FOREVER!

NO, DARLING,
THIS LIQUID
IS BAD FOR
YOU. IT'S BIT-
TER AND
ROTTEN-TASTING.
I'M GOING TO BUY
YOU AN ICE-CREAM
SODA INSTEAD!



AN ICE CREAM SODA? OH,
GOODY! CAN I HAVE A
CHOCOLATE ONE WITH
TWO DIPS?

OF COURSE, DEAR.

I HAVE EVERYTHING I
NEED... A HOME, A
BEAUTIFUL WIFE
AND CHILD...
MILLIONS IN
THE BANK...

...IF I CONSERVE THE
LAST FEW DROPS, I'LL
HAVE COMPLETE INSURANCE
THAT I'LL CONTINUE TO LIVE
OUT MY NORMAL LIFE. I'LL
SAY ABOUT THAT CONCRETE
CONTAINER TOMORROW!





SEE WILLIAMS FIRST I FIND THE LITTLE DOOR OPEN!... DADDY MUST HAVE FORGOT TO CLOSE IT THEN I FIND THIS FUNNY-LOOKING BOTTLE... HOW DIRTY IT IS!



AT THE SAME TIME, ON THE FOX HUNT...

I'VE GOT EVERYTHING TO LIVE FOR...ONCE THE MENACE OF LOSING THE LIQUID IN THE BOTTLE IS REMOVED... AND THAT'LL BE SOON!...



HOW UGLY THE BOTTLE IS... I HATE IT! THERE!

WHAT ON EARTH ARE YOU DOING? GET OFF THAT CHAIR BEFORE YOU HURT YOURSELF!



WH...
ARRRRGH!
LOOK AT MORGAN, S-SOMETHING'S HAPPENED TO HIM!



SHORTLY AFTER, IN THE LIBRARY...

YOU NAUGHTY GIRL! LOOK WHAT YOU'VE DONE! MAKE YOUR DADDY NEEDED THAT BOTTLE, AND SEE HOW YOU'VE SMASHED IT TO PIECES!

NEEDED IT!- YOU BET HE NEEDED IT, MADAM! LOOK WHAT HAPPENED TO THE RICH MR. MYRON MORGAN WITHOUT IT!



REMEMBER THIS, MY BOY? YOU LIKED IT SO WELL, DIDN'T YOU? WHAT DO YOU THINK OF IT NOW? OH, BECAUSE HE FORGOT! YOU CAN'T SEE AND YOU CAN'T THINK, CAN YOU, NOW?



I HAVE TO DO YOUR THINKING AND SPEAKING FOR YOU!-WHAT A STORY YOU WOULD TELL IF YOU COULD ONLY SPEAK!



AT THE UNDERTAKERS

WAR OF THE MARSH-MEN

By W. MALCOLM WHITE

NEW Chicago had been destroyed overnight! During the deep Venusian darkness—which lasted for twenty hours out of the strange planet's day of forty—great flares of crimson rocket trails had been seen coming from the south. Then, with terrible roaring and crashing, huge rockets loaded with high explosives had blown the small colonial city to pieces. The few survivors were able to give the direction the rockets had come from—but that was all they knew.

We of the Interplanetary Patrol stationed on Earth's polar colonies on that cloudy hot planet heard of it as soon as we had returned from our latest mission. We had been far up beyond the stratosphere cruising slowly over the huge and eternal cloud-bank that covers the second planet. We were looking for a missing pleasure-plane, said to have been piloted by Verna Jensen, daughter of Governor-General Jensen of Earth's colonies.

Verna had left the day before to fly across the equatorial clouds to the South Pole Station. But she had never arrived. No word had been heard from her—but that was not surprising, for radio waves do not easily penetrate the electric static of the Venusian atmosphere.

We eased our little cruiser into port at North Pole Base. When we got off, hoping to have a rest, it was our Captain Birch who came running back to us with the news of the New Chicago disaster.

"But who was it?" "Where did the bombs come from?" "Why?" the members of our small crew asked. But he did not know. Nobody knew. We were ordered to take off at once. All the sky-cruisers of the command stationed there were out, looking for the unknown enemy.

We hastily piled into our rocket ship and again headed upwards over the clouds. We went south, towards the unknown equatorial region, looking for the bomb-senders.

Venus is a planet of mystery. Covered eternally with thick clouds. There are huge sections of it that are utterly unknown. Explorers can safely travel only on its extreme northern and southern polar parts. Because Venus is millions of miles closer

to the sun than the Earth, its middle regions are far too hot and super-tropical. No one can survive there for long. Even the parts we live on, the polar regions where New Chicago was situated, were like Deepest Africa on Earth. Yet they were considered "cool"!

What strange beings may inhabit the equator of Venus no one knew. On our parts there were no natives, though there were unusual animals in plenty. So we had no idea of what we were looking for. It was the opinion of us all that Venusians did exist and evidently they were starting now to destroy all Earth's people on their world.

Our cruiser raced south over the huge sea of mist, our super-radar operating steadily to show us what lay beneath the clouds. Radar could show us some things—it showed where land and rivers were, and where the boiling oceans. But as you got nearer the equator, land and water seemed to merge and a vast belt of hot swamp-land was believed to exist there. In that mystery terrain, the radar could not distinguish details.

Captain Birch was watching the radar in the control room and shaking his head. It had been the same in our search for Verna Jensen's ship yesterday—the farther south you got, the less you could see. Now we were over the vast marshes and our instruments showed only an uninterrupted flatness beneath the clouds.

Then suddenly our alarm bells went off. Captain Birch jumped to the window. A huge robot-rocket was heading up out of the clouds towards us! Birch shouted an order. The man at the controls jammed over the rocket levers and the ship jumped wildly to one side. We held our breath—and the mystery rocket grazed past us, missing us by a matter of inches!

Lieutenant Williams, at the rear gun, managed to get his weapon working. A steady stream of atomic bullets flew from the muzzle of his wicked looking weapon. I saw them hit the strange black painted rocket, and explode. I was thrown from my feet by the terrible shock that followed.

We had hit the enemy rocket and it had exploded, but it had been too close to us

when it went off. We were falling, out of control, falling into the clouds, into the marshes below!

Captain Birch struggled to straighten the ship. He fought with the controls as the ship whirled and tossed in the air currents. Still we fell. Down, down, through the grey clouds, and then, at last we steadied, rode down to the surface below, came to a halt in the swampy marshes of unknown Venus.

The ship was somewhat damaged, it could be repaired fast though . . . and Birch ordered the men at it. Meanwhile we would have to wait there for a little while. Birch, Williams, and I opened the side port and looked out.

The ship was floating in a mass of muddy, marshy stuff, pools of dirty oily water, covered with green and yellow growing things. Great bubbles of blackish muck kept boiling up about us. Here and there hummocks of mossy land stood out. Great ugly looking trees stuck up in odd places. It was truly a dismal sight.

"Look!" cried Williams excitedly and pointed into the distance. Our eyes followed and we saw a huge six-legged monster leaping through the swamp towards us. "There's someone riding it!" shouted Birch.

Sure enough, perched on the ugly creature's back was a slim, lightly clad figure. We strained our eyes as the animal dashed on in our direction. "It's Verna!" shouted Williams.

We recognized the figure of the Governor-General's daughter. Evidently she was trying to reach our ship and now we could see why—she was being pursued!

Running after her, coming with great jumps and leaps through the marsh, sometimes in the water, sometimes leaping from hummock to hummock, were men—huge greenish monster-men, ten, twelve feet tall, horrible marshmen, the mystery inhabitants of the planet.

Verna's weird animal seemed winning, when one of the marshmen stopped, aimed an odd pistol-shaped weapon at it and fired. A burst of black smoke, and the animal jumped, gave a hideous scream and fell, almost at our ship's door. Verna scrambled off its back and we reached for her, hauled her up into the ship's entranceway.

The marshmen were right on her tracks. One leaped, went deep into the water and

managed to get a hold on her leg. Birch shot him. Others were coming from all directions. The ship rocket and I shot a glance overhead. One marshman, horrible and slimy green, had come up on us from behind and was climbing over the ship.

We rushed inside, slammed the steel door just in time. Verna collapsed into a hammock. Birch ran to the controls. Fortunately the repairs had been mostly made, an emergency system had been rigged up, and we were able to take off before the marshmen now swarming about could do any damage.

Up we shot into the steamy air above the swamp. We dropped a bomb and had the satisfaction of finishing off those fiends who had been surrounding the spot we had left.

Verna recovered her strength enough to take her place beside Birch. "There, go that way," she pointed a direction to us and our ship followed her finger. There was the city of the monsters.

It rose from the swamps just a little beyond the spot we had been forced down. It was a low sprawling city of ugly mushroom-shaped houses, hidden in the marshes. We could see several ugly rocket-launching racks just outside it and many huge black cylinders waiting to be fired at the rest of our cities.

Verna told us she had come down in the marshes for a slight repair when her little pleasure ship had trouble the day before. She had come down by accident on the hidden city of the marshmen and they had made her prisoner. They had long been planning to attack us and now they decided to attack at once. That very night the dreadful rockets had gone out that had destroyed New Chicago.

Verna had taken advantage of their confusion when our shots blew up the rocket bomb they had last launched. She had seized one of their domesticated animals—the monster we had seen her riding—and had ridden away towards where she had heard our rocketship descending.

"The marshmen could have destroyed us all, colony by colony, and we would never have been able to hit back," Verna said to us. But that was no longer to be, for I heard Birch now on the radio-beam, sending back to the North Pole Base the directions that would enable our huge battleships of space to blast the marshmen out of existence forever.

GROM THE SPIDER IN GOD OF AKKA!

THE BARBARIAN!



THIS IS A TALE OF THE WORLD'S BEGINNINGS, WHEN THE EARTH WAS YOUNG, AND STRANGE BEASTS AND POWERFUL MEN MOVED ACROSS IT'S FACE, EVEN THEN THERE WERE OLD CITIES, AND FORGOTTEN DESERTS, AND JUNGLES THAT NO MAN HAD EVER EXPLORED, AND IN SUCH A LOST JUNGLE, LIES A CRUMBLING CITY, RULED BY A FIERCE BEAST-KING, ROU, AND THE MONSTROUS AND HORRIFYING.....

SPIDER GOD OF AKKA!!!

AND MOVING TOWARDS THIS JUNGLE ADVENTURE ALONG A WAVE-TOSSED OCEAN, CREEPS A BOAT...

THE GODS HAVE CURSED US! EVER SINCE WE LEFT THAT WIZARD'S ISLE, WE HAVE BEEN TOSSED LIKE A LEAF IN A STORM...

NO FOOD!
NOT EVEN
WATER!



GLITTERING EYES WATCH ITS COMING. THINGS THAT LOOK LIKE APES, AND YET ARE MEN, CLING TO TREE LIMBS, STARING...

TWO SHE'S AND A HE!

ROU, OUR KING, WILL GIVE US MANY THINGS IF WE BRING THESE THREE TO HIM!



WE'RE LOST! OPHIR IS SOMEWHERE EAST OF HERE. MAY- BE WE CAN WALK.

I'VE BEEN GONE MANY WEEKS NOW. THEY WILL HAVE SOLD- IERS OUT HUNTING FOR ME. WE'LL BE ALL RIGHT



DEEPER AND DEEPER INTO THE STEAMING MORASS OF JUNGLE SO THE TRAVELERS. AND ABOVE THEM, APE-MEN GATHER FOR THE FIGHT...

BE CAREFUL! SOME OF THESE BRANCHES HAVE STINGERS!

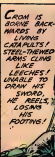


I SPOKE THE TRUTH-LIVING STINGERS!

HUI! HUI! HUI!



CROM IS BORN BACK- WARDS BY LIVING CATAPULTS! STEEL-THEWED ARMS CLING LIKE LEECHES! UNABLE TO DRAW HIS SWORD, HE REELS, LOSING HIS FOOTING!



BY THE MOOVES OF NESSUS-



DEEP IN THE SAVAGE CHEST OF CROM A SNARL OF FIGHTING ANGER RUMBLES! LIKE A WAKING BEAR HE SHAKES HIMSELF- FLINGING APE-MEN FROM HIM!

DOGS! BE OFF! GIVE ME ROOM TO SWING MY BLADE!



LIPS TWISTED IN A HARD GRIN, CROM HURTLIES FORWARD! HIS BLADE GLEAMS RED IN THE JUNGLE LIGHT! MEN SCREAM! IN AGONY THEY FALL AWAY...

ANIMALS! APES THAT LOOK LIKE MEN! BY DWELF'S MAGIC- YOU'RE FOUL THINGS!



FOR MINUTE AFTER MINUTE, ONLY THE SINGING OF CROM'S SWORD, AND THE SCREAMS AND HOT PANTING OF FIGHTING MEN, IS HEARD! THEN, A BOW-STRING TWANGS, AND THEN ANOTHER...

HE IS NO MAN! HE IS A DEVIL!

EVEN OUR SHAPTS DO NOT STOP HIM!

ARROW AFTER ARROW THUDS INTO THE FIGHTING CROM! BLEEDING PROFUSELY, EVEN HIS TITANIC STRENGTH IS SAPPED. HE REELS, SHOUTING DEFIANCE...

COME ON... ALL OF YOU... FIGHT YOU... UNTIL I FALL!

AND FINALLY CROM FALLS...

HA! HA! PRETTY CAPTIVES!

YOU WILL BE GLAD!

CROM IS DEAD... DEAD!

AT A RAPID TROT, THE APREME AND THE TWO GIRLS MOVE STEADILY SOUTH TOWARDS THE ANCIENT, AND BROODING RUINS OF AXKA...

MOVE FASTER, FRAIL ONES...

YES- OR YOU WILL BECOME CARRION FOR THE KAA!

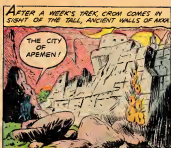
FOR HOURS, CROM LIES AS ONE DEAD. HIS BLOOD DRIES. THE RED SUN SETS AND THE PALE MOON RISE ABOVE THE JUNGLE TREES.

TOWARD DAWN, CROM STIRS, SLOWLY AND PAINFULLY. HE CRAWLS TO A LITTLE STREAM, HE PLUNGES HIS HEAD INTO THE COLD WATER...

NOW TO FIND SEAWEEPS* AND PLASTER THEM... WITH WET MUD ON MY WOUNDS.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: AGES AGO, SCIENTISTS TELL US, THERE WERE TWO MOONS CIRCLING THE EARTH

*EDITOR'S NOTE: THE FIRST RACES OF EARLY MAN REALIZED THE MEDICINAL PROPERTIES OF SEAWEED-FROM WHICH WE EXTRACT IODINE TODAY..



FROM ALL SIDES,
WARCLUBS AND
SPEARSHAFTS THUD
DOWN ON CROM...

BY
NESSUS!
I'M DONE!
CAN'T FIGHT
THEM
ALL!



WE TAKE
HIM TO
ROU!

ARGH! ROU
WANT HIM FOR
SACRIFICE TO
SPRAA!

ON THE GOLDEN THRONE OF A LONG
DEAD RULER, HARRY ROU WATCHES
HIS CAPTIVES, A GREEDY GLEAM
IN HIS PIGLIKE EYES...

HAARRGH!
TANT IS QUEEN
OF OPHIR! GOOD! OPHIR PAY
MUCH IN GOOD SWORDS, SHIELDS
AND SPEARS! YES! OR ELSE
TANT WILL BE FOOD FOR
SPRAA!

SO! THIS IS THE ONE
WHO SLEW SO MANY
OF ROU'S WARRIORS!
ARR! HE LOOKS LIKE
A WEAKLING! SPRAA
WILL NOT MAKE A
GOOD MEAL FROM
HIM! CHAIN HIM
IN THE PITS!



RUSTED CHAINS AND
MANACLES ARE USED
FOR THE FIRST TIME
IN AGES AS CROM
IS LOCKED IN THE
DARK DEPTHS OF
RAT-INFESTED PITS...

WEAK FROM THAT...
BEATING, BUT I'VE...
GOT TO FIND SOME
WAY... TO HELP TANT
AND LALLA!

AS THE FOUL AND
FETID DOORS OF THE
UNHEALTHY PIT DRAW
CROM'S STRENGTH,
A SMALL DETAIL OF
SWIFT APHEMEN
RACE NORTH TO-
WARDS DISTANT
OPHIR...



IN OPHIR, SOME DAYS LATER, ON THE
EMERALD THRONE, CUNNING BOKR'S
SITS... A CRUEL SMILE TWISTS HIS LIPS
AS HE LISTENS TO ROU'S APHEMEN...

SO TANT IS A PRISONER
IN THE CITY OF THE SPIDER-
GOD, IS SHE? AND YOU
WANT ME TO RANSOM
HER? HA.....



THIS IS MY ANSWER! **DEATH** TO ONE OF YOU! ONE GOES BACK TO AKKA **ALIVE!** TELL ROU I SPIT ON HIM! TELL HIM TO DO WITH TANTIT AS HE WISHES! **FEED HER TO SPRAA!**



ONCE TANTIT IS DEAD, MY ROLE AS KING OF OPHIR IS SAFE! THE PEOPLE LOVE HER AND HATE ME. ONCE SHE IS DEAD, SHE CAN NEVER RETURN TO STIR UP REVOLT AGAINST ME!



WHEN HIS LONE MESSENGER RETURNS WITH A TALE OF CRUEL TORTURE AND INSULT, ROU GOES **BERSERK** WITH **MAD RAGE!**

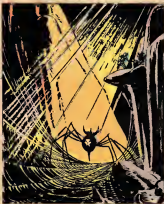
SO! HE WILL NOT PAY FOR HER! THEN SHE **DIES!** SUMMON THE GUARDS! DRAG THE PRISONERS TO THE CAVE OF **SPRAA!**



GROWING APENEN DRAG THE FEAR-RIDDEN GIRLS FROM THEIR PRISON. HARSH LAUGHTER FILLS THE AIR...



SCREAMING WITH TERROR, TANTIT AND LALLA ARE DRAGGED TO THE STONE BALCONY OF A MONSTROUS CAVE. IN THE CAVE ARE GLIMMERING STRANDS OF SILKY WEBBINGS, BROODING AND SILENT. THE NIGHTMARE FIGURE OF A MONSTER SO VAST, SO INCREDULOUS-THAT HE SEEMS LIKE SOMETHING FROM AN ALIEN PLANET!



HA! SHE MAKE GOOD BITE FOR MIGHTY **SPRAA!**



EEEGGH!

CROM IS HUSTLED FORWARD, HANDED HIS SWORD, THEN THROWN INTO SPACE...



BY THE DREAM OF PAN! THAT THING IS A REED OUT OF A WINE-FOSTERED SLEEP!



YOU'VE NEVER FAILED ME YET, SKULL-CRACKER! DON'T FAIL ME NOW!

SLOWLY, SPRAA MOVES FORWARD. HIS UNBLINKING EYES STARE HYPNOTICALLY AT THE WAITING CROM. THE MANDIBLES LIFT, REVEALING THE POISON GLANDS AT THEIR TIP...



NO CHANCE AGAINST THOSE LEGS OR FANGS! MY ONLY HOPE IS-



-TO DRIVE SKULL-BITER DEEP INTO AN EYE!

IN AGONY, SPRAA LASHES OUT WITH A GIANT MANDIBLE! IT CATCHES CROM ON THE CHEST-HURLS HIM BACKWARD WITH STUNNING FORCE!



CAUGHT IN THE STICKY WEBBING, HELPLESS, CROM STARES UP AT THE SPIDER-GOD AS HE SWOOPS DOWN ON HIM. GIANT MANDIBLE RAISED TO CRUSH CROM! DEATH STARES MALEVOLENTLY FROM SPRAA'S ONE REMAINING EYE...



BY NESSUS! IF I DON'T MOVE SOON, I'LL NEVER MOVE AGAIN!

AND THEN-EVEN AS SPRAA DRIVES HIS HUGE LEGS DOWNWARD-CROM TURNS HIS SWORD SIDEWAYS! QUICKLY, THE KEEN EDGE SLICES THROUGH THE STICKY WEB STRAND! AND THE STRAND SWINGS FREE, CARRYING CROM WITH IT!



NOW TO CLIMB UP- AND DROP DOWN ON HIM!

WITH BOTH HANDS GRIPPING THE HAFT OF HIS SWORD, CROM DRIVES IT DEEP-AGAIN AND AGAIN- INTO THE BRAIN-PAN OF THE SCREAMING SPIDER-GOD!



DIE! DIE! DIE!

SWIFTLY, CROM FREESES TANT AND LALLA, SLIDING DOWNWARD THEY DROP TOWARD THE FLOOR OF THE CAVE. ABOVE THEM, ROL, THE KING, GOES MAD WITH FURY...



HE CAN'T HURT US NOW! THEY ARE TOO FAR AWAY, AND THEY DO NOT DARE VENTURE OUT ON THESE WEB-STRANDS!

ACROSS THE CAVE FLOOR THAT IS LITTERED WITH SPRAA'S DEAD, CROM LEADS THE WAY TOWARD A FLOWING RIVER...



MOVE SWIFTLY! HYENAS DWELL HERE, TO EAT SPRAA'S LEAVINGS!

OH-H-WHAT A HORRIBLE PLACE!

ON THE BANKS OF THE RIVER, CROM SETS TO WORK BUILDING A RAFT. HOURS LATER, HE PUSHES OUT INTO THE RIVER...

BOKRIS REFUSED MY RANSOM! HE IS KING OF OPHIR! HE WILL HAVE US BEHEADED!

PAH! WHAT IS BOKRIS BEHOLD SPRAA T BY THE BEARD OF ZEUS! HE IS NOTHING!



DAY AFTER DAY, SLOWLY BORN NORTHWARD BY THE RIVER FLOWING TOWARD THE SEA, CROM COMES AT LAST WITHIN SIGHT OF THE DISTANT TOWERS OF OPHIR...



IT IS ALMOST NIGHT!

GOOD!

WE SHALL ENTER THE CITY BY MOONLIGHT!

A MIRACLE! A MIRACLE! TANT THE GOOD HAS NOT DIED! SHE IS ALIVE! ALIVE!



THE WIND FLOWS SWIFTLY THROUGH THE GREAT CITY. SOON THE STREETS AND BALCONIES ARE FILLED WITH HAPPY, WEEPING PEOPLE. SCARFS HAVE BEEN FLUNG HIGH! MEN BELLOW IN JOY AND WOMEN SOB IN HAPPINESS. TANIT THE GOOD HAS RETURNED.

TANIT! TANIT! BLESSINGS ON YOU!

BOKRIS, THE TYRANT, IS CRUEL! SLAY HIM!

TANIT-OUR QUEEN!

WORD COMES QUICKLY TO BOKRIS, SELF-APPOINTED KING AND TYRANT!

TANIT IS ALIVE! SHE COMES NOW THROUGH THE STREETS TO HER CHAMBERS!

TANIT! THAT FOOL, ROU, LET HER GO! I'LL BE REVENGED FOR THIS! CALL THE GUARD!

A THOUSAND TALKS, TO EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU-IF YOU BRING ME BACK TANIT'S HEAD!

THROUGH THE CHEERING THROGS, TANIT PASSES AT LENGTH INTO HER PRIVATE CHAMBER. SCARCELY HAS SHE ENTERED- WHEN...

KILL HER, QUICKLY! THE PEOPLE LOVE HER AND SOME MAY BE CLOSE BY... EVEN THOUGH THEY HAVE GONE AND LEFT HER ALONE!

BUT THERE IS ONE WHO HAS NOT GONE! CROM FLINGS ASIDE A WINE-SKIN- AND ONCE AGAIN HIS KEEN BLADE LEAPS FORTH...

WOMAN KILLERS! I'M ALMOST ASHAMED TO WASTE SKILL-BITER'S SHARPNESS ON YOUR KIND!

HOW DO YOU LIKE FIGHTING A MAN, EH? TRY THIS...AND THIS! DRINK DEEP SKILL-BITER! DRINK YOUR FILL!

AAGGHH!

HIS SWORD SNAPS A MIGHTY SONG AS CROM'S MIGHTY ARM SWINGS IT TO AND FRO! MEN GO DOWN BEFORE IT, SCREAMING THEIR FRIGHT AND AGONY...



CROM! CROM! IF IT WERE NOT FOR YOU—THOSE PAID KILLERS OF BOKRIS' WOULD HAVE MURDERED ME!

THIS BOKRIS—WHERE CAN I FIND HIM?

HIS DARK EYES ANGRY, CROM STALKS LIKE A HUNTING LEOPARD ALONG THE STONE HALLS OF ANCIENT OPHIR...

THE NEXT TO TURN TO YOUR LEFT!

I WANT TO SEE THE MAN WHO LEFT YOU TO DIE IN THE ARMS OF SPRAA!

IN THE SILENCE OF THE NIGHT, BOKRIS STARTS UP SUDDENLY, FEAR...COLD FEAR COMES WITH ITS CHILLING HAND AND CATCHES AT HIS HEART...

TA—TANT!

AYE, TANT! TANT—WHOM YOU LEFT TO DIE! AND I AM CROM, THE AESIR!

A CRAZED LOOK APPEARS IN THE KING'S EYES, AND THEN, QUICK AS THOUGHT, THE SAVAGE BOKRIS SPRINGS AT CROM, A DEADLY DAGGER IN HIS HAND

YOU DIE NOW BARBARIAN! YOU DIE!

THE MAD BOKRIS AND CROM LOCK IN FIERCE COMBAT—A STRUGGLE TO THE DEATH

AT THE EDGE OF THE PALACE BALCONY, HUNDREDS OF FEET ABOVE THE COBBLESTONES, CROM LIFTS BOKRIS HIGH—AND HURLS HIM DOWNWARD!

AGGHH!

THUS TANT CAME AGAIN TO OPHIR—AND WITH HER, CROM THE BARBARIAN—TO TAKE HIS STAND AT HER SIDE, AS KING AND RULER!

HE IS DEAD!

AND WE LIVE! MAY WE RULE WISELY AND JUSTLY FOR THE PEOPLE OF OPHIR!

THE END

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ALCHEMY



Although other explorers had found Venus cold, forbidding, and lifeless, this adventurer found it a world of marvelous delight. What strange alchemy had transformed it on that one Earthling's behalf?

By JOHN & DOROTHY de COURCY

IT IS ONLY an alien who can really enjoy the exotic, but the alien who has no connection with the scene, who has not even the vaguest idea what will come next, he truly experiences an unusual and wonderful thing for he smells strange smells, touches strange textures, hears strange sounds and the very air he breathes is somehow different. And so it was with me, lying on the ground, unfamiliar ground with an odd, soft feel, powdery to the touch yet not clinging as earth dust would. Suddenly remembering where I was, I sat up and looked about me.

When I had left the earth, I hadn't

known where to go first as there were so many places to visit, so many exciting and unusual sights to see and an infinite variety to choose from; but I had finally selected Venus, partly because it would be a short hop but mostly because exploration had revealed so little about it. Those who had gone there had found only a waterless dust bowl with unending dust storms which made any extensive investigation next to impossible.

Yesterday, very tired and in need of sleep, I had landed and had climbed out of my ship to find not a dust storm but a curious crowd watching me. I stood there dumbly, wondering what to do, until one who seemed to have authority took me with him into

their city. He seemed to know I was tired for he left me in a compartment barren of furniture yet seemingly possessed with all the comforts. Assuredly I had slept well for this soft, springy ground had been my bed.

As I gazed about me, I wondered if it had been wise to leave my ship, but so strange and foreign were my surroundings, I soon forgot about it. I walked through an archway which led outside and discovered that most of the dwellings about me were much the same. There were neither doors nor windows and there seemed to be no streets. The houses could have been made of earth for the walls were the same color as the ground and they were round, hexagonal and octagonal, generally.

Beyond the houses in what appeared to be approximately the city's center rose towers, high into the air. They seemed somewhat triangular to me and tended to come to a point although the distance made seeing difficult. Then I heard the bell as its sound rolled out across the city in a great, ringing crash. I jumped and looked in the direction of the towers. Again that strange, rumbling clang struck me like a physical blow. As yet I saw not a soul in the spaces between the domiciles and I thought it incredible that anyone could sleep through such a racket.

For the final time, the voice in that mighty bell rolled out, leaving a pregnant silence in its wake, a silence that must soon give birth to new sounds or it would surely burst asunder from its own electric tension. I stood there waiting, for what I did not know, avidly drinking in each detail of a new world. At that moment, my boat appeared.

PERHAPS it was the light of morning or perhaps it was because I had drunk of the refreshing cup of sleep but he seemed less formless and more concrete than when I

had last seen him. Actually, he could have been a man, a rather large man and not the least bit freakish. His features were classic and his nose was long enough to be distinguished yet not so much as to be ridiculous. His hair was pale and golden tinted and his eyes were a bright blue. The mark that would set him apart from earth men was his skin, for it too was blue.

"Was he barbarian?" I wondered, "or was his a philosophy too deep for my mind to grasp." His feet were bare, yet what need for shoes on such resilient soil? He wore a short skirt which for its color could have been woven silver, yet by its weight and flexibility must be cloth or perhaps some plastic which we did not have. There was no belt nor did he wear adornments. Indeed, his smooth skin with long powerful muscles flexing beneath it had no need of ornamentation.

He smiled then just as anyone would smile. He had teeth, seemingly like mine but more even and white, perhaps because of the contrast of his skin. He asked me a question in his deep voice, making motions with his flexible hands.

I did not understand.

He pointed to his mouth and made chewing motions.

This was clear and I nodded my head. "I eat," I said, then went through the motions of lifting a fork full of food to my mouth and masticating it.

He repeated the word. "Eat."

I moved my jaws and nodded my head.

"I," he repeated flatly.

I pointed a finger at myself and said, "I."

He pointed his forefinger at me and said, "I."

This time I shook my head violently and grasping his firm hand, turned it around so that he too pointed to himself.

He smiled again, pointed to himself and said, "bo—I."

I pointed to myself then and said questioningly, "bo?"

Gravely he nodded.

We surmounted the "you" problem in a moment. "You" appeared to be "ti."

My host, believing that he had enough fundamentals said, "I eat, you eat," and then nodded his head.

It was a rather rudimentary thing but it gave me food for thought while my tall host led me toward food for the body. We went into the house again through a different archway and there I found what appeared to be a board or piece of plastic about three feet square on which rested little pyramids of assorted food stuffs. My friend seated himself or more accurately, contorted himself, for he folded his legs into the manner of a statue of Buddha. This I tried and found I could still do since at one time I had practiced yoga for my health.

The food was certainly unique but tasty. Not one familiar flavor was represented although there was salt in a small pyramid in the center of the table. There was a pile of small, green things which resembled radishes but which tasted vaguely like cooked potatoes with a dash of parsnip added. There were many other curious things but I cannot describe them for there is nothing to compare them with. All of them seemed to be vegetables except the heverage. This was served in small opalescent cups slightly smaller than our own cups and about the shape of a flower pot. I should say, was already there, since no one appeared to add food or take any away.

The liquid was sweet but had body in the manner of coffee. It was quite clear and had a distinct blue color. My friend named each item of food as he picked it up and I endeavored to remember them.

Again I asked myself the question, "Are they barbarians or have they passed beyond civilization?" When all things needful are present, it could indicate either the idyllic existence of a tropical island or the culmination of millennia of progress.

WHEN the meal was finished, we arose and I stretched my rather cramped legs. My host made a circular motion toward the outside, smiling broadly. I nodded and followed, my legs still aching a bit. When we were outside, I thought of my ship and how maybe I should go back but then I reasoned that I came here to see the planet and not the ship. Certainly there had been no sign of hostility so far and I felt somehow that my rather battered craft would be left alone.

The light on Venus is peculiar. There seems to be something in the air which screens off most of the sunlight, yet the day seemed as bright as on earth when it is slightly overcast. I saw no shadows for light seemed to be everywhere and then I remembered that I had not seen any artificial lighting of any kind in the house. I looked back through the archway we had just come through and saw that it was just as light inside as it was outside, that same peculiar bluish light which seemed to be everywhere yet came from nowhere.

The air was warm. The temperature appeared to be unvarying as I remembered that the same warmth had persisted throughout the night. I wondered about these things and wished desperately there were some way I could ask questions.

My friend waited patiently for me whenever I stopped to look about. We walked between innumerable houses, all doorless. A number of people were outside and I discovered they were actually a beautiful people. They were all blue although the

shade varied from a rather pale tint to a pronounced purple hue. The women were generally paler and were clad the same as the men. The colors of the short skirts varied through the spectrum including colors that we cannot as yet impress upon fabrics. Some noticed us, some called greetings to my friend and some gave us only a passing glance.

We walked for a long time, several hours, always in the general direction of the towers. As we approached them, I could see that there were four of them spaced about a hundred feet apart in a diamond shape. They rose approximately six hundred feet although I could be far wrong.

My host allowed me to wander around the base of the first tower and scrutinize it. I thought at first it was made of copper or a rose gold yet when I touched it, it was not cold like metal but rather neutral like a plastic. There was an open archway on the side facing the inward part of the diamond and I could make out another on the farthest tower.

Again I had that intense desire to ask questions, to make myself understood. But how could I? Even if this man could guess my questions, how could he answer me so that I would understand? Wondering, I looked at my friend and he smiled. I studied him for a moment, trying to decide what lay behind that smile. Was it one of understanding or just an automatic response to what he thought ridiculous? I couldn't tell.

The smile faded gradually from his face as he stared back at me. Then he smiled again and said, "I eat."

I hadn't noticed but I too was hungry. It had been a long walk, I nodded and he began walking toward the nearest of the houses. I walked along beside him, trying to keep in step but it was almost impossible to match those long, effortless strides. We went through an archway and found a woman within. Before her

was a triangular board, a little larger than the one we had dined from in the morning. She smiled at me reassuringly and behaved in every way as though she had fully expected both of us.

I wondered how this could be, for my friend had spoken to no one in this vicinity and again the thought occurred. "Primitive or beyond understanding?"

The food was totally different from what I had eaten earlier except for the leverage. My friend chatted with our hostess, smiling occasionally and using gestures which could have meant most anything. When the meal was over, I smiled at the woman, trying to convey the impression that I had enjoyed the meal. Perhaps it was wishful thinking on my part but she seemed to understand.

MY FRIEND rose gracefully and walked to the archway. I attempted to do the same but my legs were so stiff and sore from the long walk and the cramped sitting position that when I tried to straighten up, I fell. So surprised was I at the incredible softness and rubberlike quality of the ground that I just lay there for a moment. Then realizing that I wasn't the least bit hurt, I pulled myself into a sitting position and when I thought of my clumsiness, I laughed. Once started, I couldn't stop and the tears rolled down my face.

My friend helped me to my feet and it was then I noticed that he too was laughing, only it was more like a heavy rumble which came from his throat. He bid our hostess goodbye and we went outside.

I looked at my friend questioningly. He smiled and pointed to the towers. I nodded and followed but this time we walked straight through the archway. Almost immediately I saw why we were here, for leading upward around the central well was

a spiral ramp. It was of a material as soft and resilient as the ground.

On an impulse, I sat down and removed my shoes, heavy, cumbersome things. I tucked my woolen socks inside the shoes and stood up and for the first time I realized that the ground was warm. My tall friend smiled, a seeming knowing smile. Yes, it was obvious and had been, that I needed no shoes here. We started up the ramp and I found walking much easier indeed.

On the wall beside the ramp lay the purpose of our visit, for painted or impressed with a startling clarity were figures, acting out a wordless drama. I saw the way these people were in the early beginning, learning fire, learning to work stone though I had not seen a stone since my arrival.

Up the familiar climb toward civilization, we walked. The higher we ascended, the higher the civilization. I stopped at each picture, studying it carefully until there appeared technology, a strange technology which certainly no longer existed. "Why had they slipped back?" I wondered. "Why the decline?" And then I saw an all too familiar thing, war.

For some reason, I was saddened. They seemed such a peaceful people. It was a shame that they had had to taste of war, death and destruction. Perhaps they were better off as they were.

We walked further and further upward and I began to feel strange things, vague stirrings in my mind. At first, I thought it was the effect of the alien pictures, pictures that were too clear. But as we ascended, I found it growing stronger. On and on we went, passing by the panorama of life and death, of man rising to new peaks and falling to new depths but this time it was man whose skin was blue.

And then we came upon another series depicting war and I started as I stood before a mushroom-shaped

cloud. So they had even had atomic energy. It seemed incredible. Something surged inside of me, a strange something and I thought perhaps it was the horror I somehow knew would be depicted soon, the ghastly spectacle of suicidal atomic war. Yet when it came, the feeling inside of me grew, the surging became intense, that something which eluded me seemed almost within my grasp. Here, pictured with unworldly vividness, was the end of a world.

Yet I found it was not the end, for many had survived and they began rebuilding. Gradually, the shape of the thing they were building became plain. It was the towers or a group like them, rising up into the heavens. Here again was advancement. So the end had not come in the hell of atomic war. But where then? Where had all of this knowledge gone?

Onward and upward we walked and now I saw space craft. They had traversed the depths of space, even to our earth. They had built cities everywhere, had become a great and mighty people. I marveled that so much had been gained and was so obviously lost. But was it lost? It seemed to be. I had seen nothing that would indicate otherwise.

Then came a series of pictures which puzzled me for they showed the blue-skinned people leaving their great cities, reentering their space ships and returning to their home planet. There seemed to be no reason for this exodus and I pondered each picture for some time. The more I thought, the more sure I became that somewhere locked in my mind was the answer to the puzzle. It was as though I were trying to remember something, something logic told me I could not possibly know and yet it was there, just on the rim of consciousness.

And then we came to the last picture. I felt as though I had been shocked electrically. I know the

blood drained from my face as I stared, unbelieving. How could it be? Yet there it was, the final picture, showing my friend standing just as he was standing and myself just as I was, even barefoot. How could they have known? It was a perfect mirror image in miniature. I moved a little but the picture of me did not. It was not a reflection. I continued to stare, fascinated, and slowly I realized that the picture was a familiar one to me. I had seen it before but where? I groped, sought frantically within my mind for the explanation but it continually escaped me, remaining just beyond my reach.

DAZED, I turned to my friend but he only smiled. It was a smile with the quality of all knowing wisdom and suddenly, he too seemed familiar to me, someone I had known for a long time. He motioned me to go onward through an archway but I couldn't move. I felt as though I were half in and half out of my body.

Gently but firmly, my friend took my arm and guided me to the archway. I paused on the threshold, fear beginning to clutch at me, but my friend urged me on. We entered to face an aging man whose skin was quite light though still blue. He motioned me to sit as he was, cross-legged, and I did, hardly knowing what I was doing and only vaguely conscious that my friend had done likewise. Then the old man reached out, touched my forehead just above my nose and I fainted.

When I opened my eyes, I felt that time had passed but there was no way of knowing. My friend held me upright, my head resting against his massive shoulders. Within myself I felt peace, a quietness I had never known and then all at once I realized I knew. I lifted my head and looked at the aged one who sat unmoving. Yes, I knew! I understood these people!

"Are you feeling better now?" the aged man asked.

It was an alien language yet somehow I understood. I knew many other things, I felt many other things, but all I could express was, "yes—yes—I'm much better now."

Now I knew that here was perfection, that theirs was not a civilization of the body but one of the soul, and that somehow I was a part of them and they were a part of me.

"Yes," the old man said aloud. "You are one of us. You always have been. If you were not—" He broke off but I understood. I was a descendant of those early pioneers who had come to earth. This I knew. If it were not so, I would have found nothing when I landed for where I was now was in, and yet not in the world, a place apart and not visible to ordinary eyes.

I looked into the eyes of the man beside me and knew I would never leave, would never want to leave. This was my home, my real home and these were my people, my people because of a bond more powerful and everlasting than one of flesh and blood for I was one with myself, a truly integrated being, and therefore one with all men who were as I.

Unbidden, I stepped through another archway and found what I knew would be there, a short skirt such as all the people wore. I removed my clothes quickly and drew on the little garment, then turning, I looked into the polished oval of metal, finer than the finest mirror. Already my skin was bluish and, smiling, I ran my fingers through my hair, fluffing it.

I prepared to leave then hesitated a moment. I knew that waiting for me was the man with whom I would be forever, forever his as he would be forever mine and yet I had one tiny regret, a regret which quickly changed into humor. When I finally emerged from the little room, I was laughing. I hadn't brought my lipstick.

Ghosts or Martians or Men of the Future...



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By
WALT SHELDON

CELESTIAL

REN should have expected it. He should not have been surprised when Chailon, the Executive Chief, took over command of the expedition party. After all, there was a great deal of glory connected with this first planet-landing in over a century.

The Executive Chief stood at the gunwales of the gravity boat, just behind Ren and the controls. His voice was metallic. Each overtone in it reminded Ren of the ping of metal cracking with cold. Even Chailon's pale blond hair and unblemished skin seemed metallic, although his movements were lithe enough. He was in superb physical shape—all aboard the

Far centuries the atomic wandered the universe in hame. But when they fin at their choice, it was ta le less amid an acean of sp

spaceship *Alpha* were, for that matter,

Ren worked the controls automatically. He was steeped in a curious thing today—an emotion—a prescient feeling without any logic or two-and-two in it, and he had been feeling this in his marrow ever since descending to the surface of this new and unknown planet.

And, now, for some reason—part of this queer emotion probably—he turned to glance at Jana, who sat along the gunwales with the other



At that moment, a dozen Ismarians descended on Jana and the trapped scientists.

LANDFALL

supermen from Earth had search of a new planetary ally landed on the world ave them inextricably help-ear-carrying nan-descriptors.

scientists and with the men of the Protec Guard. She saw him, and smiled at him. He smiled back, and felt a little better.

Chailon's metallic voice cut in. "All right, mister, let's pay attention to the controls."

Ren obeyed, but he felt a surge of something—it seemed to start just below his lungs and come up through the shell of his body. Another new emotion. He kept his stare on the control panel and threw his squarish brows

into a deep scowl. This was anger, he felt. Anger was a primitive trait, and forbidden—but it seemed to come so easily on this world.

The gravity car passed over a density fault and bumped. Ren corrected; he kept the long, boatlike vehicle skimming, following the contour of Ismarus.

Ismarus. They'd named it after Ulysses' first port of call—and they'd been lucky, all right, to find it. The scanners had picked it out of space after analyzing only a few thousand others. It met all the requirements: it was of the same mass as Earth, it had an atmosphere, Earth's temperature, one satellite and a similar rotation and orbit period. It was a jackpot find, no question of it. Now the *Alpha* had landed upon this planet,

and they had taken the gravity boat to explore in a wide radius from the big spaceship. There would be long days and nights of waiting while the *Alpha* was re-massed—they would get to know Ismarus better. Maybe too well before it was all over.

Ren glanced occasionally at the landscape all about them. He had difficulty in seeing it as a *pure sight*—his mind kept wandering into reason and analysis. The people of the *Alpha*, after all, were conditioned to analyze and reason from birth; in this they were probably superior even to the revered Ancestors who had launched the *Alpha*. Ren concentrated so that he wouldn't have to think so hard.

A queer place, Ismarus. In some ways similar to the minifilm reader pictures of Earth that every Alphan child studied—but in other ways subtly different. Very little vegetation for one thing. Mostly rolling stretches of hard-packed red and ochre sand, lacerated here and there with rock. Sharp rock, grey rock. The rocks became more frequent as they neared the mountain chain. Tortured, cactuslike plants began to appear.

"Spectro, please, Captain," pinged Challon's voice. He was still behind Ren's shoulder.

Ren ticked the scanner. The screen glowed with white light, then flashed and jiggled before it came to life. Bands of color appeared and floated until Ren stilled them by dialing.

Challon leaned forward and studied the image.

Ren looked at Challon's profile. Strong, handsome, confident face—as befitted an Executive Chief. Immense I.Q., superb physique and very low Emotional Index. Naturally. No other kind of man could hold the community together as the *Alpha* took its warping path through the universe. Science was the Supreme Being and Challon was Its prophet. These days you could hardly whisper "E equals

mc square" without a slight feeling of having committed blasphemy.

Challon was reading the spectro off the cuff. "Soil relatively fertile on the slopes ahead. Some vegetation. Might be inhabitants there."

JANA rose and came forward. Ren smiled to himself; he knew she couldn't sit still when she heard the word inhabitants. Vitology, the study of life on other planets, was her specialty, and in fact that was why she had been brought along on this first exploration trip. She came to Challon's side, looked at the screen, too, and said, "What about water? Are there deposits, or is it underground? That makes a difference in the form life takes sometimes."

"Deposits, I dare say," said Challon. He looked at Jana flatly. "After all, the atmosphere contains moisture."

Ren glanced at Challon quickly. There had been irritation in his answer—but Challon, of all people, was supposed to be the supreme intellect who never became irritated, who had practically no inconvenient emotions. Was there something in the air of this planet which was giving even Challon primitive tendencies?

And Jana—Ren saw sudden color in her cheeks. He saw a faint tightening of her upper lip and a quick movement of her grey eyes as she returned Challon's flat stare. Well, one thing, she was even more beautiful with her irritation showing like this. Gave life to her face. At times her ordinarily calm, cool mask had made him uncomfortable—reminded him that after all she was a privileged scientist and he was only a Captain of the Protect.

He looked at the instrument panel again—at first in a routine, unsuspecting way. Then abruptly his instinct told him that the instruments weren't behaving correctly.

He raised his brows. He swept his gaze horizontally, studying every-

thing. The speedometer was wavering, although the car certainly moved along at a steady pace. The mass indicator had dropped. And the spectro showed bright flashes.

Ren stared at the landscape again. He wasn't sure, but there did seem to be a faint concavity to the land here—as though there had once been a crater perhaps a mile in diameter. He raised himself in the seat to stare some more—And the gravity boat stopped with a sudden and quite unusual jolt.

"Here! What's this?" said Challon, whirling toward Ren. The car's passengers stirred and began to mutter to each other.

"Don't know," said Ren. He examined the control panel again. "Can't figure it out." He took the flat minifilm reader from his tunic pocket and opened it quickly. He pressed the button and watched the moving images flash by on the lens. The film in the reader was a tech manual for the operation of the vehicle, but, as he had supposed, it told him nothing. The standard atom symbol flashed at the end of the film, and he was still nowhere.

Lokar, the big, tawny-haired Protec sergeant hauled his bulk forward and touched Ren's arm. "Sir, maybe we'd better get the hell out of here. I don't like this spot. I don't like the feeling in my bones."

"We'll decide that in a minute, Sergeant," Ren said in a formal tone. The formality was for the benefit of Challon's ears. Meanwhile, Ren flicked a significant glance at Challon and Lokar understood. The sergeant went back to his seat.

Suddenly Jana's voice cried out sharply, "I saw something!"

"What? What's that?" Challon turned toward her.

She was standing, pointing. She was pointing at the face of a large jagged rock ahead—an outcropping the size of a cottage. "Something

over there—an animal—or a person. I'm sure of it!"

Ren stared in that direction. He didn't see anything, just the grey rock and the yellow-red sand rising toward it. It struck him then that in this circular area there was no vegetation, not even the twisted bushes or the cactuslike plants.

"It couldn't, by any chance," Challon said frigidly to Jana, "have been a slight hallucination?"

She shook her head quickly. "It was an animal. Or a person."

REN frowned to himself. *An animal or a person.* He felt a queer, pulsing thrill. In his lifetime he had never known a living thing outside of the people aboard the spaceship, *Alpha*. Nor had the others of his generation. The need for a re-massing stop came about once a century, and it had been over a hundred centuries since the *Alpha* left the legendary place they all knew as Earth.

The *Alpha's* saga was, of course, one of the first things children learned when they became old enough to sit in the hypno bays or operate their own minifilm readers. And always the importance of their destiny as Alphans was hammered into them. Their entire culture was built around the idea that eventually there would be a Day of Arrival—the *Alpha* would return to Earth.

Later, when they began to study relativity, they could understand how it was that the Day of Arrival would come not centuries after the departure—but within a few score years. Earth years, at any rate. Aboard the *Alpha* generations would experience the passage of centuries, or seem to. But since the *Alpha* was traversing the entire curve of space it would reach its starting point *both in space and time*. The only period of time difference would be a few score years required for acceleration and deceleration. Thus—it was the hope of those

who launched the *Alpha* that it would return in their own lifetimes and enable them to meet their own many-times-great-grandchildren.

But the calculations were very involved. The best thinkers among the Ancestors differed in their predictions of the Arrival date. Some by many years, some by several or even a dozen centuries.

At any rate, Ren's world had always been the corridors, cubicles and recreation spaces of the mile-long spaceship. The only other living things he had ever known were those aboard it. He knew that it was emotional—primitive—for him to be excited like this, but he didn't care. Strange, ever since setting foot on Ismarus he hadn't been particularly ashamed of any of his emotions.

"Force screen, Captain!" came Challon's pinging voice, snapping him out of it.

Ren punched the button that would throw protective force around the gravity boat. He expected the red indicator to glow, but it didn't. And Challon was losing some of his cold metal calm. "Don't tell me *that* doesn't work, either!" he said. Definite anger in his voice.

Ren looked up and said, "Have you noticed we're in some sort of an old crater here? Do you suppose that has anything to do with it?"

"Suppose," said Challon, "we examine the facts first, and then draw our conclusions." He said it quite icily.

Ren shrugged. He had an enjoyable, momentary dream. He pictured himself punching Challon's handsome face, and savored the idea. Then he looked up again, toward the rock and the small rise that skirted away from it. He saw at least thirty human figures come over the crest of the rise and stand silhouetted against the yellow sky.

"Prepare to repel attack, Captain!" snapped Challon.

The others stirred, buzzed, pointed, drew sharp breaths.

"Battle stations!" Ren called over his shoulder.

He heard the Protec guardsmen shuffle about and take their places. Jana moved to the bow of the gravity boat, and pointed to the photoscope. "Let's have a close look at them."

Ren nodded, switched the gadget on. He was pleasantly surprised to find that it worked—it was one of the few purely electronic devices in the boat. He began to adjust focus, elevation and azimuth. An image of one of the human figures appeared, became sharp.

"Definitely humanoid," said Jana softly. She was squinting at the image; she was in deepest concentration. Ren saw her again—despite her good looks and youthful features—as the scientist; the gal with the head full of serious thoughts, and no nonsense about it.

The Ismarian in the photoscope screen was naked except for the grey-furred skin of some animal wrapped clumsily about his waist. His skin was white in the Caucasian sense, but deeply tanned by sun and weather. He had matted brown hair across his chest and shoulders, and a thick, unkempt beard. His mouth was partly open, as he stared at the gravity boat, and Ren saw that his teeth were yellow, broken, and mottled, although not especially large. He carried a metal-tipped spear in one hand, and a club of stone lashed to a wooden haft hung from a thong at his waist.

"It's—it's incredible," Jana said, staring at the image.

"What's incredible?" asked Challon. He was moving about a bit nervously, as though undecided about the next thing to do.

Jana nodded at the screen. "They're not only humanoid, but their culture is that of primitive Earthmen. The law of averages would certainly indicate some differences—"

Challon spoke a little wearily. "Jana, our science has achieved its present state by one very basic attitude—taking nothing for granted. How do we know the law of averages is valid in this particular place? And further, to the scientific viewpoint, *nothing* is incredible. You know that."

Jana tossed a quick, sharp look at the Executive Chief, but didn't answer. Ren knew how she felt—there was just no point to answering a man like that. The fatuous dummy. For all his I. Q.: the fatuous dummy.

THE RANK of Ismarians came to a ragged halt. They were perhaps seventy-five yards away now. They began to gesture and parley among themselves; Ren could hear the sound of their voices, but could make out no words.

"We'd better blast one just to let them know what we can do," said Challon.

Ren started to nod, and then brought his head up. He gaped at Challon. The man had given his order so casually that its meaning hadn't struck Ren immediately. Ren said, "Look, they haven't tried to harm us yet, what's the use of blasting them?"

Challon's eyes were very hard as he turned them upon Ren. "Captain, I didn't say to blast *them*, I said to blast *one*. Perhaps it's unfortunate we have to do that, but it's the wisest move at present. One sub-human life isn't going to make much difference in the outcome of this thing."

"But, even so, if—"

"I'm in command here, Captain."

Ren shut his mouth hard. He didn't say anything.

Challon kept the hard stare upon him. "You'll order one of your men to blast the nearest Ismarian, now, Captain."

Ren said, "I'll be damned if I will."

Challon's finely drawn eyebrows rose. "Oh?" He put his thumbs into the golden belt that marked his rank.

His tone didn't become angry. His face stayed calm, metallic. "All right, Captain. We'll see about this later." He turned his head. "Sergeant!"

Lokar bumbled forward, "Yes, sir?"

"Drop that man—the nearest one by the rock there—with your reactor."

Lokar glanced at Ren, frowned heavily, then finally said, "Yes, sir." He raised his reactor, which was pistol-shaped except for the slender, crutchlike shoulder support. He aimed, and he touched the trigger button.

Nothing happened.

"You should take better care of your weapons," said Challon.

Sergeant Lokar had already removed the rear plunger and was staring into the anode-barrel. But—but there's nothing wrong with it!" he said. "It just don't work, that's all!"

"Nonsense," said Challon. He took the weapon.

"Maybe it's not nonsense," Ren said softly. "The reactor's nuclear, too. Nothing else nuclear works on the boat—only the purely electronic stuff."

The sergeant glanced toward the Ismarians. They were closing their ranks, now, and some were advancing cautiously. One with a bow and arrow was dropping to his knee, and fitting a shaft to the string. "Captain," he said to Ren, "maybe we better get the blazes out of here."

Ren looked at Challon. "How about it?"

"We do seem to be temporarily defenseless," said Challon, scowling. He started to look about—with just a touch of helplessness in his manner.

Ren pointed sternward. "We can go a hundred yards or so and be out of this area—whatever it is. The reactors will probably work, then. If they attack. They might want to be friendly you know."

As Ren spoke, a volley of arrows came.

Instinctively everyone ducked be-

hind the metal gunwales of the gravity boat. Some of the arrows rustled nastily overhead; others struck the sides of the vehicle with a soft clatter.

"All right, we'll run for it," said Challon. "You take over for the withdrawal, Captain."

REN turned a faint smile upon Challon, and let him see the contempt in it, and then he called out his orders. "Scientists first," he said coolly. "Guardsmen then deploy in skirmish order in two ranks by squads. Ten yards between ranks. Advance in relays, thirty yards at a time. Zig-zag. If they pursue, fire as soon as your weapons operate—rear rank always firing. Everybody got that?"

The Guardsmen nodded or indicated understanding by silence, and moved to their places. Sergeant Lokar hustled the group of civilians to the stern thwart, and muttered instructions to them, telling them to run crouched, and keep a zig-zag course.

The scientists—five men in civilian permo-cloth, and Jana in her silver halter and skirt—scrambled to the ground. They ran. The first rank of Guardsmen leaped after them, and fanned out into a broken line. The second rank followed, and Ren and Challon went with it.

Shouting came from the attackers. Arrows snapped and fluttered all around them. Ren turned his head for a quick look. The skin-clad, muscular, hairy Ismarians were charging after them, running with a kind of powerful waddle. Some were brandishing their clubs and spears. Others were dropping every few seconds to their knees to discharge arrows again.

The first rank halted, faced the rear, and crouched—the second rank kept its broken course and ran through it. Another thirty yards. Ahead of the two ranks Jana and the other scientists continued to run. When the second rank came to its halt, Ren turned

with the rest and saw that the Ismarians were gaining upon them. This was to be expected, since their retreat consisted of both running and halting—Ren could only hope they'd make the edge of the shallow crater in time. And after that he could only hope the reactors would begin to work again.

The fugitives took one more relay. Ren was in the foremost rank again. Looking back, he saw that the Ismarians had already reached the stalled gravity boat—and that they were giving it a wide berth. They passed it warily; that slowed them some. Well, a break there. Ren swiveled his head to look forward again and saw the beginnings of tough, wiry grass and cactus ahead. The edge of the crater, or whatever it was. Jana, and the five scientists had already reached that area, and now they had paused to wait for the guard. The second rank came running by; one Guardsman had an arrow in his upper arm and was being helped by a comrade. Another lay toward the gravity boat, lay very still, and an arrow grew from the middle of his back.

Ren rose to run again. He turned. He looked toward the edge of the crater, and at that moment a dozen Ismarians suddenly appeared from behind a fencelike outcropping ahead of them and ran toward Jana and the five scientists.

"Get them! Don't let them!" shouted Ren. His hand raised he ran forward.

He forgot to zig-zag. Maybe that was it. He felt an abrupt and terrible blow in his shoulder, and it spun him. He fell to one hand and knee. He stared stupidly at his shoulder and saw the arrow in it—the arrow that had gone all the way through. He put his hand on the protruding forepart of the shaft. He saw that there was lots of blood.

Most of all he wondered why it didn't hurt. It just felt numb. It had been painful when it struck, but now it felt only numb; he shook his head

and felt a little light-headed and crazy about the whole thing.

He started forward again. He saw the dozen Ismarians who had made the flanking movement descending on Jana and the others like a flash flood. A guardsman reached one of them, ducked a blow from his club and swiped him viciously across the cheek with the stock of his reactor.

Ren heard footsteps and grunting behind him. And several shouts. He spun his head to face it—feeling terribly dizzy as he did so.

He saw the blurred shadow of a club and in the instant before he found blackness he realized that it was about to strike his skull. After that, the blackness. The deepest, blackest, nothingness he had ever known.

IT WAS night when Ren awoke. He didn't realize this at first, of course, because he awoke very slowly, his hearing returning first, and the sound of the wind over the parched plain coming to his ears. Next he opened his eyes and when they focused he saw the stars in front of them. For a moment he thought he was back in space; at the port, or in the control bubble of the *Alpha*, perhaps.

But he wasn't; he was lying on his back in what seemed to be the same spot where he had fallen.

Except for the purr of that breeze it was very quiet.

He rose to one elbow. That made him dizzy. He shook his head, and felt like retching, and he decided he would as soon as he got in a position to. He looked at his shoulder. There was no more arrow in it, and the blood around his wound had caked. He wasn't bleeding any more.

Weak, he fell back again and thought some more.

He turned his head and saw a broken, stained arrow beside him. It was broken just behind the head. In the packed sand by it, which glistened very coldly in the light of Ismarus's

moon, he saw a footprint and a larger depression, as though someone had knelt beside him. Now he could suppose what had happened. An Ismarian—the one who had struck him perhaps—had removed the arrow and then left suddenly. Probably called when the others of the *Alpha* were subdued and captured. And after that they'd evidently forgotten about Ren, supposed him dead.

His head began to ache now and he groaned.

Well, no use wondering how he'd been left here—thing to do now was to move. Recover. Find out about the others. He lay there for many long minutes, breathing slowly and deeply, and then, finally, somehow he managed to move again. He managed to stagger, squirm and crawl back to the gravity boat. It took him most of the night. It was nearly dawn when he opened the seat lockers to find the medicines and concentrated food.

The moon went down. He sat there in the darkness and munched on energy biscuit and stared out at the landscape. The darkness wasn't absolute—he could still see enough shapes every once in a while to be startled. More than anything else he kept thinking that Jana was somewhere out there, and as soon as he could move a little better he was going after her. *He was in love with Jana, in the illogical primitive way the romances in the minifilm reader depicted; now he knew this, too.*

He ate slowly and thoughtfully. He stared at the barely discernible shape of the large rock from behind which the Ismarians had first come.

For some reason this feeling of intuition in him was stronger than ever. The quietness, or his own weakness, perhaps. At any rate he began to think about Ismarus and about everything that had happened. He recalled the queer surge of emotion he'd known when the *Alpha* first landed and he oversaw the breaking out of the grav-

ity boat. He recalled the strong, primitive things he'd felt—and the way even Challon had slipped into anger and sarcasm. He recalled that first look at an Ismarian in the photoscope. He recalled the moon rising and setting over the planet.

And the crater here. Nuclear devices wouldn't work in it. Others would. His minifilm reader, for instance; that was purely electronic. He took it from his pocket again, glanced into it and saw once more the standard atom symbol which marked the end of the tech manual. Just to make doubly sure he tried projecting the image on the instrument panel—and that worked, too.

His frown became a weighted thing. He held it for a long time. He scarcely dared believe what a kind of instinct was telling him about Ismarus.

He heard movement and the sound of low voices by the big rock. He lifted his head quickly. It was too dark to see who made these noises. He dropped to one knee, and then moved carefully forward to the instrument panel. The photoscope was still focused upon the vicinity of the rock. He switched it on. He worked the lens angle to take in a wider amount of area.

When the image came into being he saw Ismarians—a score of them perhaps. They were talking in low tones to each other and every once in a while pointing or staring in the direction of the gravity boat. And behind them he saw their captives, bound neck to neck by a series of crude, heavy ropes.

THERE was in Ren for a moment an urge to get out of this place. To slip over the side of the gravity boat and run in the opposite direction. Then he could circle, or wait—or do something, anyway, to rescue his friends later. But he recognized this urge for what it was: plain panic.

And then his idea came to him,

abrupt and full-blown, out of the darkness of the night.

This would work only if his guesses were right. And, of course, if it didn't work, then he'd be quickly and easily taken by the Ismarians, too. He didn't waste time thinking about it too much. He moved to the starboard rail, crouched there facing the rock, and took the minifilm reader from his pocket.

He opened the flat, little case and held it toward the rock. He thumbed the projection switch.

A huge atom symbol glowed from the face of the rock. It was the same design of nucleus, electrons and their orbits which had become in effect the coat of arms for the people of the *Alpha*. The thing that inspired an uncomfortable sort of reverence every time it appeared. The symbol that marked all their official seals and such things as tech manuals—

The bearded faces of the Ismarians were visible in the light reflected from the image on the rock. They were all turned toward it. Ren could see the ringed whites of eyes. One was trembling visibly and slowly backing away from the thing. Another was putting his forearm up in front of his eyes.

One exceptionally large fellow fell flat on his face before the symbol and covered the back of his head with his hands.

It was hard to say just who started the rout. Maybe several did simultaneously. But there was suddenly much shouting, and in the next instant the skin-clad men were scattering—running pell mell away from there in several directions.

Ren didn't smile. His face was drawn and grave as he clambered from the gravity boat and headed for the bound captives.

Challon's voice sounded less metallic than it usually did when he said to Ren, "Well, I don't know how you did it—but you did it. I guess you've

got a permanent place in the *Alphan* annals, now, Captain."

But Ren scarcely heard him. Most of all he wanted to look into Jana's grey eyes. Deeply. He did this as he unfastened the crude ropes about her. Yellow dawn was breaking and he could see her face in its broad, clear light. He could see by her eyes that she loved him, too. He spoke, then, for everyone to hear, but he was really talking to Jana.

Ren said, "It wasn't coincidence at all that we found *Ismarus*. It was pretty much in our warp-curve, after all. Sometime, somewhere the *Alpha* was bound to get to it."

"What's this?" asked Challon, still able to be just a mite pompous, "what's this you're getting at, now?"

Ren moved his eyes over the group. "Have you noticed the way you feel on this planet? The funny instincts and emotions you get? The kind of things even our science can't quite figure out?" He saw by their frowns that they had. "Not only *Ismarus*, but its satellite, and the whole solar system—even its inhabitants—are like those of Earth. There are slight differences. In mass, and the shapes of the continents, for instance. These were the things that threw us off."

Challon had his finely formed head

cocked to one side. "You mean—this is Earth? And there's been some kind of flaw in time? We came back in a prehistoric period, like the *Chellean Age*?"

"Not prehistoric," said Ren. "Post-historic. There's been a catastrophe—maybe to the very men who launched the *Alpha*. The crater that interferes with our nuclear devices by some kind of radiation is probably a souvenir of this. I think we'll find lots of them all over the planet. Whatever it was, it shook Earth violently enough to alter its mass and shape slightly. Change the course of the rivers and seas. It must have been very terrible. And no wonder the savage descendants of the survivors fear the atom symbol when they see it!"

They all stared at Ren. Some blinked, not quite getting it.

"Now we're home," Ren said to them. "Now we've got work to do. Now we've got to start all over again—and this time we've got to find something—some inner kind of something—to keep the catastrophe from happening again." He turned to Jana. He took her hands, and pulled her toward him. She smiled, searching his eyes and Ren began to see where the beginnings of this inner something might be.

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By LEN J. MOFFATT



IN THE history of show business it will have to be recorded that vaudeville died two deaths. The first death was caused by the advent of the moving picture and the radio program. The rebirth of vaudeville was due to the happy union of television (an ancient term for video) and die-hard vaudevillians.

As for the cause of the second death of vaudeville . . . well, there are many different views on the subject. It is my own opinion that the so-called "new" musicoloroma video shows killed vaudeville—little over three years ago. People are so easily led into fads. I contend that these pseudo-culture programs of "artistic and intellectual significance" will sicken and die of their own stench and once again video fans will howl for "new and different" escapes. Vaudeville *will* return.

But I'm getting away from my story. I mentioned that there were several reasons expounded as to why vaudeville lost popular favor for the second time. One of the most popular—and in my opinion, most erroneous—theories was that Pike Pickens killed vaudeville. Now I could sit

right here and say that Pike Pickens was one of the best comedians of all time. I could even say he was the greatest all-round song and dance man of all time. And millions (including the Pike Pickens Fan Club in Colday, Jupiter) would agree with me. True, there are many who would disagree (especially those who get so much stupid satisfaction out of "musicoloroma") for Pickens and his show was something you *had* to either love or loath. No fence sitters as far as Pickens was concerned.

Now I rather liked Pike Pickens and his video show. Knew him personally, of course. Appeared a few times on his program, in fact. But that is still another story.

I thought you might like to know what happened to Pickens after the second death of vaudeville. Oh, you know now, of course, but I bet you don't know it all. And anyway I mean right *after* the depress hit us.

I know I wondered where Pike had gotten to. Lost touch with him for awhile you see. Most all ex-vaudevillians were seeking employment in other fields and we didn't always have time for the old "get-togethers" like we used to have. . . .

I finally got this job here. Not bad when the customers are drunk enough



*Something poured
up out of the rocks
and seized the two
scientists.*

to be generous and yet not so drunk as to miss the hat. I often wonder how much money I actually lose when the coins roll under the table and are retrieved by the damned busboy who I know makes more than me in tips and poor service he gives too. . . .

No one seemed to know what happened to Pickens. Poor Pike. So very famous. Presumed to be loaded with the long green. So what if vaudeville did piffit, they said. Old Pike has more dollars than he can spend in two lifetimes. That's what they thought. Hah. Remember the Sub-space Investment Bubble? Pike (and

a few others, myself not excluded) got took good on that deal. Of course, the guys behind it didn't make out so good either, not unless they can spend the stuff in sub-sub-space or wherever they took off to when the government boys cracked down on them.

Well, when I got to wondering more than a little about Pike and got over the letdown of working in a crummy joint like this I thought I'd look him up. I figured he was probably doing as bad as me so neither of us would have anything to be ashamed of. He didn't have me on his last few programs; got the idea it was me who

talked him into the Subspace deal. He was just as excited about it as any of us. But I figured we were both too poor to be sore at each other, and then there was always the chance that he was doing a bit better than me and might know of something extra in the way of a break for me. Well, you know how it is.

I couldn't find Pike anywhere. Imagine that, if you can. A big name in show biz and nobody—but nobody—knew where he was.

IT WAS only pure luck and by accident that I found out about him. I had the afternoon off . . . oh, this was over a year and a half ago. I went down to the spaceport to watch this new job take off. Yeah, I know you know but listen. All of it, you don't know.

Everybody and his brother was there. Everybody and his brother's brother. But I'm an old crowd dodger-thrasher and managed to get as close as the law allowed. It looked like just an ordinary spacer to me and I thought, hell I shoulda stood at home and got it on video. You remember, they were going to make a special announcement about it and what the special announcement was. Yeah. Subspace. The government had taken it over and had really developed it. That is, the science boys with the UN, though the way the announcer talked you'd think he'd done it all by himself. I think he's the same guy that's on that early afternoon musicolorama show. Hell of a thing to wake up to but it does give the correct time.

So this ship was going off into subspace and come out on the other side of Alpha Watchamacallit. Yeah. Centauri. Ever hear Pike sing his song on that? Little did he know. . . .

And they'd be back within a year, according to the schedule. Yeah, I know you know all about that but I wanted to tell you about Pike Pickens. He was on it. A member of the crew

of the *Faraway World*! A messman yet. Of course, Pike always was a good cook. Gad, the parties he used to throw and the food. None better.

Pike—too old? Don't kid yourself, buddy. Sure we had that running gag about his age but don't forget. He may have been around in show biz a long time but he started young. Remember the Child Star of Video? That was him, under his real name then. Little Lewcy Yoder. Didn't know that, eh? Why, I thought every Pike Pickens fan knew that. . . .

Getting back to Pike and the *Faraway World*. I found out he was aboard when they read the list of crewmen and their occupations. At first it didn't click and I almost didn't hear it, his name being down at the bottom of the list of messmen and beginning with a Y too. When the announcer said "Lewis Yoder," it didn't mean a thing to me 'til about two seconds afterwards. I does a double-take and ask aloud, "Did he say Yoder?"

The lady next to me said, "Yoder, Schmoder, so what? I still don't see how a submarine is gonna work in space and it looks just like any old space-tub to me."

Get it? Subspace, submarine in space. She actually said it to. I've been saving that one; when vaudeville comes back. . . .

But getting back to Yoder, alias Pike Pickens. I knew I had found him. The announcer said something about last minute visits of friends and relatives. I rushed to the administration building there at the spaceport and put in a request to visit Pike. Yoder, that is. Told them it was Very Important, etc. Thought Pike might refuse to see me since it looked like he was hiding out from all of us. But I was wrong. He saw me and a half dozen other show biz characters. A typical Pike Pickens going-away party, on a much smaller scale than usual, of course.

But all we needed was Pike. The

bottle he was passing around helped too, but Pike was Pike at his best which is the way he always is, in my opinion. Knocking himself out to get a laugh. Anything for applause and haw-hawa. He sang. He danced. He cracked wise. He out-punned Jack Forst (whom you know is considered the world's, in fact, the System's champion punster). He did imitations. Good old Pike. He just threw the whole thing at us in a half hour or so. Wonderful. All we had time for was to say Good Luck and maybe weep a little into the empty bottle.

Then Pike danced his way out of the room—his usual half-drag, half-bounce exit—and he was gone. Gone forever, we thought, for we had little faith in the subspace thing. Even with the UN backing it now and the fact that Pike was sticking his neck out.

WELL, that didn't mean much. Not that Pike was the hero type but he wasn't kidding me with all that buck and wing, gladhand, hoopla and hokum. All that song and dance was just a cover up. He was really low, believe me.

I saw him that way only once before and that was when his third wife died. Never married again after that, you know. Really had a find in her and bingo she's killed in that airbus accident. He put his show on that night same as usual and a lot of people said it wasn't right for him to do it. But Pike would never let an audience down, never walk out on his loyal fans. It was tearing his heart out but he went out there and put on one of the best shows video has ever seen. And that's the way he was the day of the take-off. He was just putting on his last show—for us, his personal friends; swan song and dance and then *psstt*.

He figured like we did. Subspace was *The End*. He wasn't going to stick around and see if vaudeville would come back. He was living now

and he couldn't stand living without it so . . . death to Pike Pickens and let Lewis Yoder, messman, live awhile until . . . until whatever happens to people who dare to enter subspace happened. It was supposed to be a short cut to other systems. He hoped it would be a short cut to oblivion.

O.K., O.K., I'm telling it.

You see, Pike Pickens wasn't dead at all. You just can't kill a good vaudevillian. How do I know? I got it from a spaceman who was also a crewmember on the *Faraway World*. You remember when the *Faraway World* returned and was covered with glory and whatnot. Well, of course, I tried to find out if Pike got back OK but when I got to the spaceport it was so jammed with people I couldn't even get into the place this time. Why they didn't stay at home and get it on video I'll never know.

Well, I had a reason for going down. I had to see if our boy Pike got back. Finally I gave up trying to buck the crowd and went across the street to a bar. Thought I'd wait 'til things calmed down.

A guy was sitting there drinking beer and making loud smacking noises and then he'd bang his fist on the bar and sing out for more. I noticed he wasn't paying and wondered about it until the barkeep says for him to drink up, spaceman, it's on the house.

"I been dreaming of this," said the spaceman, "I been dreaming of this for months. Real honest-to-gawd beer. Aaah."

"Maybe I should call you subspace-man," cracked the barkeep. I got it then. This spaceman was a special friend of the barkeep's and somehow he had eluded the cheering crowd and got into this quiet little bar to enjoy his beer in peace. This guy was a *Faraway World* crewman and maybe he'd know about Pike. So I asked him.

"Lewis Yoder," he repeated rather doubtfully, "Yoder . . . Oh! You mean Pike! Old Pike Pickens. Hell, we

recognized him right off. Him and that fake name, Yoder! Who wouldn't know Pike? Why I've been a Pike Pickens fan for as long as I can remember."

My heart warmed to this intelligent young spaceman. It is people like him who will bring vaudeville back to its true place in the world of show business.

"Could you tell me—about Pike?" I asked. I was a little afraid. If anything had happened to him . . . Yet I had to know. You know how it is.

"Tell you about Pike," he said, "Could I tell you about Pike? I sure as hell could! Every man jack on the *Faraway World* could tell you about Pike! I suppose it'll hit all the newscasts but who'll believe it or get it right? Let me tell you about Pike Pickens. Like he used to say. Voss Dere, Chollie."

He told me about Pike.

IT SEEMS that the trip through subspace was a snap. No one even got spacesick. In fact, those who had gotten spacesick from being in regular space felt good again when they went into "subspace drive"—whatever that means. And got sick again when they came out of it and into normal space again. They got to Alpha You-know and were coasting around looking for a planet similar to Terra or at least one where they could use the suits and masks they use on Venus, Jupiter, etc. This you must have heard or read.

Well, after all their technical testing and what not, they land on this small planet which proves to be similar to good old Terra in atmosphere and gravity. They divide the crew up into scouting parties and take turns going out looking for inhabitants, flora, fauna, and other things and stuff they look for on alien planets.

I guess the science boys had a great time, though every one else had been bored by the trip and were even more

bored by the planet. It was similar to Earth as far as gravity and air were concerned but the landscape looked like one big rock slab with cracks in it here and there. Some crazy kind of vegetation grew in clumps around these cracks but otherwise—nothing.

Incidentally, the spaceman told me that the boredom of the trip had been alleviated by Pike's putting on some of his acts for the crew. I guess most of them liked it, though the spaceman said there were a few who actually got up a petition asking him to "can it" for a couple of days. Now how anyone can be bored by the versatility of Pike's talents I'll never know.

Anyway, like I said, the crew was divided up into scouting parties and came the day that the party Pike was in (though I'm sure it wasn't his favorite kind of "Party," heh-heh-heh) was supposed to do the scouting. Each day the party on duty would make a circle of the ship going out farther each time. I think it was the third or fourth day of scouting, if I remember correctly.

The spaceman who told me this was in this party too. Name? Oh yes, his name was Wally. Wally said they got pretty far away from the spacer. They had two of the techs with them, the scientists, you know. About all the crewmen had to do was keep a sharp lookout and let the techs know if they saw anything unusual or saw trouble coming, etc. They had stopped near one of those big cracks in the rock floor and the techs were messing around with the vegetation growing there.

Wally was helping Pike set up his portable mess outfit as it was getting near chowtime. Pike, as usual, was singing and wisecracking while some of the men laughed and a few dead-heads grumbled.

Then it happened.

Something came up out of the crack in the rock and absorbed the two techs. Some of the men would never

have saw it happen if the techs hadn't screamed all the time they were being absorbed. It took several seconds, I guess.

Of course the men were awe-struck. And just stood there staring. Then they started to shoot at the things with the variety of weapons they carried with them. Everything from .38 pistols to flame-throwers. The thing—which looked like a big mass of orange-colored gelatin—wobbled up out of the crack and came towards them.

Looking back over their shoulders as they ran, they saw that more of the things were coming up for air too—and for them. The alien beings must have had mental telepathy or something because presto! more of them popped up out of the ground several yards ahead of them. They were surrounded; cut off from the ship. The techs had been carrying the walkie-talkie and it was gone with them.

Eventually someone would come from the ship looking for them. Eventually. In the meantime the . . . the . . . things would be eating them alive.

WALLY or someone figured the things could throw up an invisible shield around themselves; only way he could explain that the weapons didn't stop the monsters. The things moved slowly but were closing steadily in. . . . Everyone was scared speechless.

That is, everyone but our boy Pike Pickens. He was scared too, but never speechless.

"Maybe we can reason with 'em," he suggested, "get in contact . . . think at them. . . ."

"This is no time for jokes," croaked someone, "they probably don't think the way we do . . . they're completely alien. . . ."

The man started shooting again, wasting their ammo.

"Wait a minute!" called Pike, "I got an idea!"

By this time the men were too scared to object, if they wanted to. So Pike outlined his plan.

"Look, guys," he said. "When I started on this tour I wasn't figuring on coming back. I'm surprised we got this far. As long as I don't have vaudeville to go back to I don't much care if I ever get back to Terra or anywhere in our system. Then there was a gal named Melina . . . gone too. So here's what I propose. I'll do everything I can to attract these things' attention. I'll try to get them to chase me. Then maybe the rest of you can find a break between and try for the ship. What can you lose?"

Nothing could they lose. Someone suggested drawing lots. Someone suggested that more than one person make the sacrifice on the theory that the monsters would be more inclined to chase two or three people than just one. But when Pike has the stage he's the whole show. No one can steal scenes from him. He insisted that they do it his way and there was little time for argument.

"Here I go," he said. That's what he always said just before every show, just before the signal said On The Air. . . "Here I go."

He started off at an angle between the two groups of monsters. He faced the group that was between them and the ship. If he could distract their attention, get them after him alone. . . .

He began a sidestep dance and sang: "Take me back to Alpha Centauri. . . ."

The rock ground was really hard and his metallic shoes made the tap-clog sound good. This was really his swan song and dance, yessir. . . .

He sang louder and danced harder and gave that familiar shout between lines. . . .

"Yaaaaaaaaa. . . ."

The alien beings began to move towards Pike. Pike alone! It was almost too good to be true, was what some of the crewmen said. Of course they

hated to see Pike get it, but the rest of them would be saved. . . .

They could see the ship now. If the monsters would move just a little more. Pike went into a buck and wing and then began his imitations. Then back to the song and dance routine again, hamming it up good.

The things kept after him and Pike kept moving.

The crewmen broke and ran. Half-way back to the ship Wally turned around to see what had happened to Pike. He had heard no screaming. In fact, he could still hear Pike singing. . . .

There was Pike, dancing and singing,

surrounded by the monstrous blobs. He raised his voice a pitch higher and began all over again.

The monsters moved in . . . closer . . . closer. . . .

Then . . . they all dropped dead.

Wally said Pike felt really low-down and blue about it all the way back to Terra until one of the techs finally explained to him that it was probably the sonic vibrations peculiar to Pike's voice (or any singing human voice) which killed the alien beings and not necessarily the quality of Pike's Songs, Dances, and Snappy Chatter. . . .

Beer? Don't mind if I do. . .

RAIDERS OF THE SOLAR FRONTIER

(Continued from page 23)

ries, asking her to use her influence with Pemberthy, if she had any influence, to try to get him the arms that be so sorely needed.

"It's hopeless," he said. "I can't fight lethal rays with quarterstaves and cutlasses and crossbows—" He passed his door and did not notice, would not have cared if he had noticed—"and that fat little beggar is sitting on top of enough material to turn this world into a fortress. . . ."

"I'll see what I can do, my dear. I won't promise anything, but the next time that he has me up to his room for cocktails I'll put your case as strongly as I can. The trouble is, he might be jealous."

"What of?"

"Nothing." She smiled up at him, her eyes greenly luminous under the rusty hair. "Nothing at all, Alan, but whose fault is that?"

"Perhaps mine."

"Yes. Perhaps yours."

"But a man has certain loyalties. . . ."

"Why worry about loyalties when time is so short? Tomorrow, or the day after, the black ship of the aliens

may attack. She may, even now, be attacking. . . . And whether we win or whether we lose, it will have been something to have had each other. And you talk of loyalties. What cause has Lauranne given you to be loyal?"

"I wasn't thinking of Lauranne," lied Latimer. "I was thinking of my duty to this world, to the race. I was thinking—" He lapsed into silence and thought:

Bloody liar. Of course you were thinking of Lauranne. And yet—Ailsa is so different. And it's no use kidding yourself that you're going to win this forthcoming scrap and get a free pardon and marry the girl. Because you're not. Even with Thunderqueen's armory and workshops thrown open to you, you wouldn't stand a snowball's chance in hell. All you can do is fight to the last man and the last gun if Fatty Pemberthy lets you have the guns in time—and see to it that that mousy little mutant Fenwick does his stuff before you blow the last round away. So why not? But Lauranne. . . .

And there came to him the memory of those lines of poetry that his wife

had quoted when he was new on Ceres. Only a short time ago it was, as men measure time, but it seemed that Lauranne's voice was coming to him over unguessable gulfs.

*There go the loves that wither,
The old loves with wearier wings;
And all dead years draw thither,
And all disastrous things. . .*

The dead years, he thought, and the old love that has withered, and a disastrous thing drawing closer and ever closer from the stars. . . I will do my best, I will fight to the last man and the last gun, but I reserve the right to snatch some few moments of personal happiness from the wreck. . .

THEY had come, now, to one of the big park spaces. At this hour it was almost deserted, and the sun lamps in the blue haze of the high roof were dimmed. And across from the wide expanse of lawn and beds of flowering plants there were trees. And the azure mist seemed to curl through their branches. In this world of caves and tunnels where there was neither night nor day there was yet the dim mystery of evening. And the knowledge that the twilight had been turned on by some grubby little technician did nothing to detract from its magic.

For the magic was within themselves.

Slowly, arms around each other's waists, they walked across the grass to the trees. And in the privacy afforded by the overhanging branches they found a couch of soft moss. And the girl's face as she lay relaxed, was a pale glimmer in the dusk, and her eyes were like two of the stars that were all that was lacking from the man-made dusk.

Latimer stood looking down at her. There was power in those eyes and a depth in which he could easily drown. Now that the moment had come, the opportunity, he was strangely reluctant to press home the attack. It

would be nice to be able to say that it was the thought of Lauranne that acted as a deterrent but it would not be true. What held him back was the realization that he was not the attacker but the defender, and the dim knowledge that far more was at stake than his unimportant virtue.

Ailsa said: "Why don't you sit down? The moss is soft. . ."

And Lauranne, although far from his thoughts, was not far away in the flesh. The bushes briefly protested at the rapid passage of a body through their interlacing branches, there was the dull gleam of an uplifted blade in the twilight, and there was a sputtering shower of blue sparks as the blade struck home.

CHAPTER V

The Monsters in Their Midst

ALAN LATIMER was fast. There was only one thing that saved his wife's life—and that was the strange thing that had happened when she buried her knife in the body of her rival. It didn't make sense. And so Latimer, who by his grip on Lauranne's wrists had prevented a second blow did not turn the knife as he could easily have done, did not end Lauranne's life as she had ended Ailsa Rae's.

But he said bitterly, with grim intensity: "You bitch!"

"I'm not sorry. You can't make me say I'm sorry. You can break my wrist and use my knife on me, but I'm glad I did it!"

"How did you know we were here?"

"What does it matter. I wanted to see you—oh, no, nothing personal merely something that you, as Big White Chief of Ceres should have known about. And when you didn't come I went, first, to the Boss's office. And there were two officers from the ship just going in with a big case, but the guards wouldn't let me

in. And while I was still arguing Kimball came out with the two men from *Thunderqueen*, and told me that you had been there with Pemherthy and Wood about an hour ago . . ."

"You saw Kimball?"

"And why not? Is there a law against it?"

"No. But it may interest you, my dear, to know that the last time I saw the Boss, Wood was sending him on a trip down to the fertilizer tanks. And he had his belly blown out . . ."

"But I saw him. I tell you I saw him . . ."

Latimer relaxed his grip of his wife's wrists. He wanted time to think things out. It seemed that there was some phony time element involved, but Lauranne had said that she had seen the Boss *after* she had sent Lane with his message. And the problem was of such importance that it dwarfed into insignificance the fact that at their feet the girl Ailsa was sprawled ungracefully supine, a broken doll. He forgot Ailsa, but Lauranne did not.

Before Alan Latimer could stop her she had fallen upon the body, was ripping and thrusting with her knife. And a low moaning sound came from the dead woman's lips, and her right arm went up feebly, jerkily, to ward off the attack, and the right knee flexed and then suddenly straightened. And again there were the sputtering sparks, the smell of ozone. And something small and hairy scuttled on long, spidery legs from under the body, screaming shrilly and wordlessly as it ran.

Lauranne threw her knife, but missed. And Latimer jerked himself out of his mood of shocked stupefaction and jumped. He landed squarely on the little monstrosity. And as he stamped its life out with his heavy boots he found himself feeling grateful that he was in uniform and not shod with thin civilian sandals.

He turned to look at his wife, and

she stood and looked at him, and the twilight seemed alive with stealthy menace.

He said: "So that's the way of it. That's why Wood never knew me, although he was executive officer of *Thunderqueen* when she picked up *Pathfinder's* boat. And that's why there have always seemed to be too damn' many of these people from the ship."

HE STOOPED over the body. It was now as lifeless and as unconvincing as a dressmaker's dummy. It was not even very cleverly made, just a roughly human robot of metal and plastic. Latimer found the knife, himself began to rip and tear. But his use of the weapon was actuated by curiosity rather than by viciousness. And he found that the robot had a human brain, part of a human brain, just a sliced and mutilated mass of grey tissue floating in a transparent container, with wiring running from it to the little compartment in the lower part of the body that had housed the alien, the controls of the robot.

"Just a Trojan Horse," murmured Latimer softly. "But how. . . Oh, that's the way it must have been. They're master psychologists, these . . . things. And, given the rough framework as a basis, they could create the illusion of a living, breathing actuality. And they'd have the victim's memory cells to work with. . ."

He held the container in his hands.

"It—she—must still be alive. . ."

And he felt an overwhelming regret that he had never known the real Ailsa Rae—and when his mind slipped into imaginings of what must have been done to her, and to all of *Thunderqueen's* crew, he was glad when Lauranne jerked him back to the present with a voice that was unnaturally harsh.

"So you fell in love with a thing

like an overgrown spider! Aren't you grateful to me for saving you from a fate worse than death?" she sneered.

"I suppose so," he replied listlessly, ungratefully. "But what was it you wanted me for?"

"You can take an intelligent interest now, can't you? Well, I went out through the northwest gate, it's hardly ever used, as you know. And I found a ship's boat. There was a man beside it, he must have died almost as soon as he set foot outside the airlock. The boat itself was damaged; some kind of projectile had smacked clean through the cabin. And the pilot must have been wounded by it, got into his suit, and lasted just long enough to get down to Ceres. . . ."

"A boat! Lauranne, this is great! It means that we can get news through to Earth!" Then his face darkened. For all that he or anybody on Ceres knew, Earth had fallen already to the invaders, was overrun with little horrors that scuttled on long, spidery legs, that screamed wordlessly as they ran. He could not hope to fathom the alien mentality, but it seemed to him that those who had come in the captured liner would hardly have bothered themselves with Ceres, unless the penal planetoid was merely the laboratory out of which would come the formula for the conquest of the Solar System.

"We will see the boat," he said.

"What about this?" Lauranne spurned with her foot the wreckage that had been Ailsa Rae. "And that?" She pointed with her toe to the pulpy mass out of which protruded one long, many-jointed leg.

"Yes. You're right. If they find this mess the balloon will go up at once. And we shall have no chance either to warn Earth or to put the other plan into effect. . . ."

He took the knife, and with its aid scraped a shallow grave. With scant courtesy he pushed the robot's body

into it, and then gingerly lifted the crushed remains of the alien and dropped them beside the body. He stood with the brain case, the pitiful remnant of what had been the girl Ailsa bobbing gently up and down inside it, in his hands. He made as though to put into the grave, hesitated, looked at the knife that he had left lying on the ground.

Lauranne snatched the case from his hands. She threw it down, snatched up the knife and put all her strength into one, chopping blow. The little plastic sphere split, the fluid and what had been floating in the fluid oozed over the moss.

"And that's all," spat the woman viciously. "Bury it with the rest of the rubbish and come and look at the boat."

THE sun was harshly bright over the northwest face of Ceres when they stepped out of the rarely used airlock. The lifeboat was not immediately visible. At first Latimer was inclined to doubt the truth of Lauranne's story, to believe that she had lured him out here for some dark purpose of her own.

It so happened that the killing of her rival was not murder, was just the first minor victory of humankind over the aliens. But he knew that this fact was merely incidental. And he felt for his wife a new respect that was more than the old respect revived. That had never held a tinge of fear. He was glad that she was leading the way, that he did not have to bear ever in mind his unprotected back.

"Here we are," said Lauranne suddenly, her voice tinny in the speaker of the helmet set. She was standing on the brink of one of the many craters that pitted the face of Ceres. This one was almost circular, was about fifty feet in depth. The walls were rugged, but it was the ruggedness of molten matter that, in solidi-

fyng, has made a permanent record of all the eddies, the liquid turbulence, of its flow. At first the boat was almost invisible. Only the very extremity of her bows reflected the shaft of sunlight that slanted down into the pit. And then, as the sun rapidly climbed into the black heavens, she was revealed as by the pulling back of a dark curtain.

Carefully, choosing each foothold and handhold with caution, Lauranne clambered down into the crater. Latimer followed. And it was not long before he was standing on the fused rocks, looking up at the hull of the boat that was of greater importance to him, and the race, than to the crew of the ship for which it had been supplied.

He shifted his regard to the open airlock, the flimsy, telescopic gangway, and the body that lay at the foot of the spidery contraption. It was that of a man, and though his armor was undamaged he himself had suffered grievous hurt. It was easy to see through the transparent globe of the helmet that one side of the face was dark with clotted blood, that, had the pilot lived, he would never have seen again out of that eye.

Latimer looked up to the cabin of the boat. He saw the ragged hole that had been made by the passage of a projectile, decided that the damage had been done by one of the four-inch guns carried by merchantmen as a concession to those who demanded that the liners of space go armed about their lawful occasions. He smiled grimly. If those antiquated weapons couldn't even put a ship's boat completely out of commission, what use would they be against a pirate or a raider from Outside? But all this was irrelevant. He climbed the catwalk into the cabin.

Once inside the little compartment he ignored the bloodstains, the damage that was more spectacular than serious. What held his attention was

the log book on the desk by the control panel. He read the words: Log of the Spaceship *Thunderqueen*, Voyage 45. Commenced April 14, 2357; Finished. . . .

And where the date should have been filled in, would have been filled in had *Thunderqueen* completed her voyage, was a dark splash. It could have been ink, but Latimer preferred to think that it was blood. It was more symbolic.

With clumsy, gloved hands he tried to open the stiff board covers. At his first attempt he found himself reading the details of the liner's loading at Port Curtis, at the second attempt he struck a day's routine record of orbits and positions, all the trivia of a well run ship. And his third attempt revealed only blank pages.

L LAURANNE had followed him into the boat

"Shut the doors," he ordered. "Both of them." The woman obeyed. And then Latimer went to the locker in which were kept spares and tools of all kinds, took a sheet of thick, transparent plastic and hurriedly and roughly cut it to shape with the big shears. He took the electric welder out of the box, hoped that there would be enough power in the batteries to operate it. There was. And when the joints had been made to his satisfaction he opened the valve of the emergency air tank, snapped down the switch of the cabin heater.

"Why didn't he . . .?" began Lauranne.

"Maybe he couldn't. It's easy enough when you have two hands to work with, and it's my guess that the poor devil had only one. . . ." Latimer was stripping the thick, metal-plated gloves off his hands as he spoke. He flung open the visor of his helmet. And he snatched the log book from the desk and started to read aloud.

SEPTEMBER 7, 2357

0056 G.M.T.: Screens reported object, relative bearing 047°-342°, on collision orbit. Automatic pilot took avoiding action.

0101 G.M.T.: Orbit and speed to Master's orders. Object apparently uncharted asteroid, approached for observation and investigation.

0207 G.M.T.: Vessel in closed orbit around object.

0215 G.M.T.: Number Six Lifeboat. Commander E. E. Wood, Cadets J. Perkins and T. Rasmussen, launched.

0303 G.M.T.: Lifeboat observed to make landing. Report received by R. T. from Commander to effect that he and Cadet Rasmussen have left boat to obtain geological specimens, investigate apparent artifact.

0317 G.M.T.: Commander Wood to Captain Pemberthy: "There's a door here, Captain, set in the cliff face. I think I can get it open. We're going in!" Captain Pemberthy to Commander Wood: "Don't. Leave it. Why doesn't he answer?" Communication with the Commander ceased, possibly because of high metallic content of walls of tunnel he had entered. Captain Pemberthy to Cadet Perkins: "Let us know at once as soon as the Commander and Rasmussen come out. Let us know at once if you see anything wrong." Cadet Perkins to Captain Pemberthy: "Aye, aye, sir."

0415 G.M.T.: Cadet Perkins to Captain Pemberthy: "They're coming out now, sir." Captain Pemberthy to Commander Wood: "Well, what did you find?" Commander Wood to Captain Pemberthy: "Nothing."

0445 G.M.T.: Captain Pemberthy to Commander Wood: "What are you waiting for, Wood? Why don't you blast off? Return to the ship at once." Commander Wood to Captain Pemberthy: "Slight Converter trouble, sir."

0507 G.M.T.: Lifeboat blasted off from asteroid.

0527 G.M.T.: Number Six Lifeboat in cradle.

05. . . .

"And then something happened," muttered Latimer. "There's nothing else on this page . . ." he turned over rapidly . . . "nor this. . . . Ah, here we are, . . . But it's hard to read. . . ." He looked at Lauranne, his face grim. "But it was harder to write!" He resumed his reading, slowly and hesitantly as he struggled with the cramped, distorted calligraphy.

September 9—not that it matters what the date is. As long as I have it right

for my navigation. . . . Not that I can do much in spacesuit with only one good hand. Thank God for the instruments. . . . And guess I'd better pray that we do hit Ceres.

This asteroid. . . . Didn't bring my work book, couldn't find it. But can remember figures roughly. Elongated elliptical orbit, 63° to Plane Ecliptic. Perihelion November 17, Solar Distance thirty-nine million, Dec.—from Earth—3° 45' north, R. A. 11 17 00. Can't remember odd seconds. And it's for Perihelion.

And get it. Get it. Don't land, blast at long range. Whoever reads this tell them that. Tell them to destroy on sight. Don't land.

This is what happened.

It was my watch when we picked it up. As Navigator had gone in boat had to try compute elements of orbit. Good job I did. Figures here rough, but should be sufficient. And get it. Get. . . .

Boat came back. Wood got out, and two cadets. Walking little stiffly, but all seemed quite natural. Came along to Control lugging dirty big case or chest they'd found and brought with them. When Captain asked Wood where he'd been all this time, the three pulled guns they'd taken with them, held us up. Byrne, Second Pilot, jumped for them, shot in belly. Then shot Cadet West. Seemed as though did it to keep rest of us quiet, maybe, testing weapons.

Tied us all up then. Opened chest. And hundreds—thousands—things like spiders came out. Intelligent—could see that way examined everything. And us.

Rasmussen stayed as guard. Rest went down to passenger quarters. Most of them sleeping—turned out to see asteroid, got hored, turned in again. Could not have been much fight, but beard one or two shots. Waited what seemed like hours, then Wood and Perkins came back. One by one took us down to Main Lounge. Place fitted up like operating theatre—was operating theatre. They had their robots ready—just flimsy things of wire and plastic with motor, compartment in body for one of spider-things. And in head. . . .

They opened up people's brain cases. Sliced away most of brain—kept only what they wanted—memory and such. Put this in transparent balls with a mess of wiring, put them in robots' heads. And then robots came alive—weren't any longer ramshackle dummies.

But the blood—and the screaming. . . . No anesthetics, of course. And bodies sprawling around with no tops to their

heads—and damned spider-things dipping beaks into what was left of brains. . . .

One that tied me didn't make good job. Knots loose. Hoped to get free in time to save Ailsa, but too late. . . . All I thought of then was getting away from ship in lifeboat, warning world.

Didn't see me going until almost at after door. . . . Made number 3 boat—and whole mob streaming after me. Aliens and people. . . . But weren't people, just robots. . . . But Ailsa there with rest of them, waving knife. . . .

Got into boat, blasted off. And damned things cleared away gun—let fly at close range. Shell right through control room—transmitter smashed—face cut—hand broken. Got into spacesuit somehow. Second and third rounds burst right alongside—guess they thought they'd got me. Didn't start drive again till ship well clear. . . .

Now, Ceres. Hope, they believe me. Must believe me. Use their transmitter . . . warn world. Fifth Column. Trojan Horse. Wonder how fast those things breed?

Can't write any more. Weak. Hand stiff. Glove stiff. Pencil worn down, can't adjust. . . .

Perchellon November 17—Solar Distance thirty-nine million—Dec. three forty-five north—R. A. eleven seventeen zero zero. . . . And don't land. Don't land. Destroy on. . . .

"And that's all," said Latimer.

CHAPTER VI

To the Last Man

WOMANLIKE, following his recital of the dead man's log, Lauranne had been inspecting the fittings of the little cabin. A switch went down under her inquisitive fingers. And, suddenly, there was music, strains that abruptly faded and were replaced by a man's voice.

"On the last note it will be precisely eighteen hundred, G.M.T.," it said. The measured notes came in strong and clear. Then: "Here is the news. . . ." There followed a recital of the past day's events on Earth and in the colonies. There was nothing to merit a headline. There was no word of *Thunderqueen*, not a whisper of alien invasion.

Latimer sighed gustily. "I was always afraid that we were the last, and not the first," he admitted. "But this is as far as they've got." Then: "Hell! The radio! It works!"

"Of course it works. Pemberthy and Wood—or the things masquerading as Pemberthy and Wood—went along to our station with Carter. And in charge of the box of tricks right now will be a thing masquerading as Carter. . . .

"Here's the way I see it. When they indulge in their fancy brain surgery they help themselves to all the memories of the victim. They know a fair amount about Earth, and they found out about Ceres. This world has been just a laboratory guinea pig. They're working out techniques, finding out how much they can get away with. And when they're ready they'll take over, leave a garrison, and push off in *Thunderqueen* for Earth.

"And if they handle things really well, *nobody will ever know that there's been an invasion*. At least, not until they can afford to come out into the open and slaughter the few real humans who survive. . . ."

"And what do we do about it?"

"Now we have the boat we can warn Earth. What sort of shape is she in?"

"Not bad. . . . But how that poor devil managed to land her—weak as he was and with only one good hand—is more than I can say. The Jovian System is bandiest now. . . . If we can take the boat there we can use their wireless. . . ."

"But suppose. . . ."

"Have to take that risk I've checked the fuel. Even to Ganymede it means free fall most of the way."

"And the other plan, the original?"

"Don't know. But it would be safer. Trouble is that we can't trust Fenwick to go ahead with his part of it unless he has moral support, or a pistol at his back. . . ."

"Yes, it would be best. That and the boat. And I'll see what I can do with Fenwick. . . ."

They clambered out of the lifeboat, down into the pit into which she had been set. As they passed the dead man Latimer thought briefly of giving him decent burial, decided regretfully that there were so many other things of far more pressing importance. And the unknown watch-officer of the Jovian liner would not thank them for wasting time on a ceremony that would, shortly, be entirely meaningless.

The sun had set and the cold struck through their insulated suits. Latimer looked up at the frosty stars, wondered whence had come the little world with its alien invaders. He wondered how many other races had fallen victims to its vampire inhabitants, then dismissed such queries from his mind as being useless. If things went well nobody would ever know anything about the aliens except such scraps of information that survived about their appearance, their methods of waging war. The log of *Thunderqueen* would be the tomb of a race. If Fenwick's doubtful courage would stand the test.

They came to the airlock. Together they entered the prison world of Ceres, with its parks and its gardens, its cargo of broken lives, its freight of menace from beyond the stars. Together they walked along the softly lit corridors, closer to each other than they had been for many a month. And together they entered the park in which the false Ailsa had been killed.

It seemed—here in this world without seasons—that there was the smell of autumn in the air. Every breath they took brought with it the sense of the transitory nature of all things. But the spell was abruptly broken when they came to the grave in which they had buried the shattered remains of Alien and robot.

An open, empty trench yawned before their eyes.

IT WAS Fenwick who was first to meet them.

As they hurried over the wide expanse of park they saw a little, agitated figure stumbling towards them. And the grotesque haste of the little man, flitting through the twilight like some agitated bat, served to emphasize the distant mutter of side-arms, the roaring murmur of many voices, of which they had become increasingly conscious.

"Latimer!" gasped Fenwick. "It is you, isn't it. Say it is you! They've taken the controls of the moving ways, they hold all the airlocks. . . . And our people are holding out in the Marlowe Memorial. . . ."

"How are they doing?"

"They can't hold much longer. The others have more guns—the only ones that we have are those we've taken from dead bodies. And they aren't bodies, Latimer. They aren't bodies. . . . I tell you that they're only flimsy affairs of wire and plastic. . . . What are these things? And they've brought heavy guns from the ship, mounted on carriages, and they're firing them down the corridors and tunnels. . . ."

"Is the tunnel clear?"

"I don't know. It was. I came past that way, and I didn't see anybody . . . or anything. . . . But you're not. . . . Say that you're not!"

"I am, Fenwick. We are. Come on!"

Latimer pulled out the gun that he had taken from the body of the thing clothed as Ailsa Rae. With his left hand he gripped the arm of the little thief. Lauranne, on the other side, did likewise. They hurried him over the short grass, towards the mouth of the tunnel that would afford the shortest approach to the big, burglarproof door. Proof—that is—against the common run of cracksmen. But this Fenwick was not of the

commonality. Star-begotten, his father a spaceman, the faulty insulation of some long ago broken-up ship had produced in him a mutation, a gift, that could have led to distinction, fame, in the world of science. That *would* have led to such distinction had it not been for the fatal taint that had brought him to rot on Ceres.

It was an awareness of more dimensions than three. It was the ability with simple tools, or no tools at all, to force the most complicated lock of Man's devising to his will. It was a gift that could have been used to unlock the ultimate secrets of matter. And it was a gift that had been used to unlock safes and the vaults of banks.

It was a gift that, in the end, would procure for its owner a world for a funeral pyre.

As they left the park the thunder of gunfire became louder, more ominous. The crackle of the smaller weapons was almost continuous, and now and again would come the deep, reverberating boom of the artillery. Latimer thought of his men hemmed in in the Marlowe Memorial, wished vainly that he was with them. And he wished that he had some way of letting them know that the rearguard action they were fighting was not in vain, that every minute gained contributed to the ultimate downfall of the invaders.

There had been fighting along this tunnel. There were the bodies of men and women. Some few had been shot in the head; those corpses had not been violated. The majority had been killed by body wounds. Every battlefield in Man's long, bloody history has known the plunder of the slain, but never such gruesome pillage as this.

At the mouth of the tunnel leading to the door to the power plant there were four guards. They wore robot bodies, their own flimsy anatomies could never have hoped to handle the

heavy guns that they carried. But these were no robots clothed in the illusion of flesh and blood. They had a rough, scarecrow similarity to humankind and that was all.

Unaccountably they hesitated. It may have been that they took the three running towards them for their own kind. Although that, in view of their undeniable telepathic powers, is doubtful. But they hesitated. It was only for a split second, but it was enough. The circuits and relays actuating their mechanical muscles could never hope to equal the speed with which Latimer aimed and fired. The sound of gunfire was thunderous in the tunnel, and before the last echoes had even considered dying all four of the alien guards were down, each with an explosive slug in the compartment in which lived the controlling intelligence.

And Fenwick was down.

HE WAS not dead; one of the bullets fired by the guards had struck the tunnel wall against which he was crouched. The explosion had driven fragments of stone deep into his side. He was not dead, yet. Lauranne knelt beside him, doing what little she could, whilst Latimer collected the weapons of their fallen enemies.

The wounded man writhed and groaned.

"Stay with me," he pleaded. "Don't let them open my head. . . . Don't. . . ." He clung to Lauranne's hand, looked up at her with the pleading eyes of a hurt spaniel.

"I'll stay," she promised.

With pistols stowed all around his person, Alan Latimer came to his wife and Fenwick.

"How is he?" he demanded, little of gentleness in his tone.

"He'll last," replied the woman.

"Long enough. . . ."

They picked up the wounded man, carried him to the huge, gleaming

door that blocked the tunnel. They set him down on the stone floor. They looked in baffled wonderment at the array of wheels and dials and symbols set on the metal surface. It seemed to them that even if one should have the right combination the opening of the way to the power station would be a task only to be undertaken after prayer and fasting.

Fenwick looked up at the door too. It was not the first time he had seen it. When he arrived on Ceres he had been taken by Kimball, who had heard of his gifts, to make an inspection. The Boss had asked him then if he could open the door without unleashing the doom that lay behind it. Truthfully, he had replied no. If he had been able to answer yes he would have been, after the Boss, the most powerful man in Ceres.

Now he was the most powerful man in Ceres.

And the irony of it was that, if he were asked the same question as before, the answer would be an unqualified affirmative.

In the past the power that lay within his mind had been a wild talent, uncontrolled and uncontrollable. It had been impossible to concentrate, to hold the flickering picture steady. Not that it was ever a picture—the word is used merely for convenience. But the sense of perception came and went, faded and waxed strong, faded again not to return for hours, or days, or months. Now, with the changes wrought in his brain and neural structure by pain, by the slight decomposition that precedes the death of a living organism, the picture was bright and steady. And his mind, as it were, went out and handled the beautiful intricacies of lever and tumbler, electronic flow and magnetic field.

And understood.

"Are you sure you can tackle it?" Latimer demanded.

"Of course I'm sure. L . . ."

He tried to rise to his feet, reached for the nearest wheel, fell heavily. And a growing, glistening pool on the floor where he had fallen was mute testimony to the inadequacy of Lauranne's rough bandaging. He looked up at them, his wizened, grey little face contorted with pain.

"I can do it," he whispered. "I can see the levers and tumblers. But one of you will have to turn the dials. . . ." Then, "But I don't want to die. I don't want to die!"

L AURANNE reached out. She snatched one of the pistols from her husband's belt. She cocked it, making sure that this simple operation was performed as noisily as possible. She pressed the cold muzzle against Fenwick's neck.

"Now will you do it?"

"Yes. Yes! That dial there, the top right hand one. Turn it to D-O-O-M-S-D-A-Y. . . ."

"Doomsday?" She struck Fenwick across the face with the barrel of the weapon. She struck him again. He started to scream, but she struck him yet a third time. . . .

"Stop it!" shouted Latimer. "You are smashing the poor devil's face!"

"I know it. Now, Fenwick, this 'Doomsday' of yours. That word has an ominous ring. . . . Could it be. . . ." her voice was low, almost caressing. . . . "that the dial you want me to turn is one of the controls of whatever safety device this door must have?" She raised the pistol threateningly. "Answer me!"

"Yes . . ." whimpered the little crook. "Yes. Don't touch the dials. Just the wheels. And don't. . . . Don't!"

She said: "If you're lying again *They* won't find any head on you worth cutting open"

"That lower right hand wheel . . ." babbled Fenwick almost delirious. "Take it. Turn it to oh three, seven, then left-handed to three four six.

Right-handed to oh three five. . . ."

"Wait." She turned away from the wounded man, left him dabbing ineffectual hands at the blood streaming from his battered face. She ran back along the tunnel to where Alan Latimer was standing, guns ready, poised to fight off alien interruption. She caught his arm, pushed her face close to his, whispered: "Haven't you forgotten something?"

"What?"

"The boat, you fool. Aren't you supposed to be galloping off to warn the System?"

"Not now. We can't leave Fenwick by himself to open the door. We must stay."

"Only one of us need stay. . . ."

"Of course. You'll find the boat fairly easy to handle. And remember, free fall as much of the way as possible."

"I can't handle a boat. Given unlimited fuel for experiments I might make Ganymede, provided that the air and food and water hung out. You must go."

"But we can't leave Fenwick."

"I shan't leave him."

Then Latimer turned to face his wife. He said: "You're right. Of course you're right. But can't you see that I can't go?"

Lauranne said bitterly: "If Ailsa Rae were sitting in that space scow waiting for you, you'd be off like a shot! Go, damn you! Do you think that I want to die with you after what has happened?"

Latimer turned white under his tan. His lips worked, but he said nothing. Then, at last, the bitter words came. "Take these," he said, pulling two of the pistols from his belt. "You might want to shoot me in the back."

He turned abruptly, strode down the tunnel. Lauranne stood and watched him go, half raised her arms, let them fall hopelessly to her side. "You fool," she whispered. "You fool.

Of course I don't want to die with you. I want to live with you!"

Slowly, listlessly, she made her way back to where Fenwick, an untidy bundle of rags, was sprawled on the tunnel floor. She looked down at the dying man, then at her wrist watch. "Thirty minutes at least," she muttered. "Have to give him thirty minutes to get to the boat, fifteen to get clear at maximum acceleration."

And down the tunnel drifted the sound of gunfire, fainter but still continuing, showing that some few defenders yet were gaining for her the time she needed.

"And that's that," said the Admiral. He was pleased with himself, had good reason to be so. The forces under his command had made a landing, had taken prisoners without loss to themselves, had blasted a little world into a thin, faintly luminous haze. And when the Admiral let his mind stray to those same prisoners—ohscene, spidery things that scuttled about their cages on many-jointed, flimsy legs—he felt no compunction over the act of destruction that he had performed.

"Where's that fellow Latham . . . Latimer?" he demanded of an aide. "Think I'll have him up for a drink. . . ."

But Latimer did not come. Instead came a messenger who told of how the ex-lieutenant had hurt into the prison compartment, had opened fire with two pistols, slaughtered the helpless Aliens. The guards had tried to stop him. One had been killed outright, the other was not expected to live.

"And he was saying something," concluded the messenger. "I couldn't make it out, sir, but it sounded like poetry. Something about old loves, and dead years, and disastrous things, it sounded like.

"But that was just before he shot himself."



The first issue of OUT OF THIS WORLD ADVENTURES aroused a great amount of mail, as might be expected of any first issue, and was surely to be expected of as different a first issue as ours. If we were to do justice to all the letters that came in, we would have to turn over all the pages of this magazine to letters alone. We're sure no one wants us to do that, and we are

also sure that readers prefer fiction to comment. For that reason we must regretfully omit many of the interesting letters we have received and we must limit ourselves in many cases to publishing excerpts from comments rather than the whole letters. You are invited to write to us about this issue and let us know your thoughts and suggestions.

D. A. W.

FLYING SAUCERS

Dear Editor:

I have been a reader of Fantasy stories for a great many years and after perusing the first issue of your new magazine, I am writing my first fan letter to tell you that I really enjoyed the stories.

Although I have always had a preference for stories of prehistoric civilizations, etc., I have become more interested recently in "out of this world" adventures, such as space and time. The "Flying Saucers" of the present day (?) have become such a controversial subject that one has the feeling that there must be something going on of which the general public is in ignorance.

Of all the stories in your magazine, the one by Mack Reynolds stands out in my mind. . . . One wonders if his story "The Discord Makers" is altogether fiction.

I am glad Fantasy magazines are getting away from "horror" covers. I believe such type of covers have been a detriment to the magazines in the past, for certainly more people are buying sci magazines than ever before. Some covers were much too nightmarish for the general public who would not buy them. Many people still think of the stories as "trash" but I have found some very interesting theories in many of them.

Wishing your new publication the best of luck, I am, Yours truly,

E. Gordon,

1069 E. Market St., Akron, Ohio

IT'S TERRIFIC

Dear Editor:

Out of This World is one of the best things that ever happened to the fantasy and science fiction world. It's terrific!

Being only 16 years old, I just love your illustrated section. Please make it longer. I enjoyed every story and the art work is darn good.

You'll have to put O.O.T.W. out on a monthly basis or I'll go nuts waiting for each issue. Yours truly,

Dick Mattson,

R. #1, Box 72, Roseau, Minn.

PICKED UP SPEED RAPIDLY

Dear Ed:

Well! And Vol. 1 No. 1 certainly is. It didn't get off to such a good start, but it picked up speed rapidly.

Surely Cummings can do better next time. He has! This one stunk. (One stink above stunk!)

Old V. V. Vas Vunderbar!

"Omega" had a good thought, new, too, but slipped somewhere.

Puzzle Pi made this a "Wish Ish." (Wish There Were More.) Didn't, in fact, know Tenn had such a good Penn.

"Bogger" must have been written by the kid. Which same would have been alright if he had told it.

"Terror" was good writing. Especially at first. The idea was good. This should

(Continued on page 123)

THE CITY OF SINGING CUBES

(Continued from page 50)

with rifles by the door. They nodded, and their rifles swung around.

"Psycho," Clevenger said.

Ballance's hands fumbled around his desk, came up with a revolver. He pointed it at Burkeson who didn't seem to notice, or care particularly.

"Burkeson!" Ballance shouted crisply. "Snap out of it, man. That's mutiny you're talking! Insubordination! Guards, take him back to the rocket to the Doc, give him a hypo and—"

Burkeson laughed. "Fools, fools!" He laughed until he cried. "Poor proud fools!"

Clevenger waded through a pile of pneumatic cushions, piles of tape recorders and tape and files. He yelled at Burkeson.

"What happened to you? You go outside, then you come back in a few minutes later, with your top blown. What's eating you, Burkeson?"

Burkeson staggered. The muscles of his face twitched. He opened his eyes slowly and there was something leaden and dying in them.

"We're humans," he said, "and we can't help what we are. Maybe we got off on the wrong track somewhere. I don't know. I don't blame you, Clevenger, for being power-mad, and never able to think about anything except how you can destroy half the world and kill off billions of people. . . ."

"Burkeson!"

"No, you're just something that happened, like everything else. I don't blame you, Clevenger. Or you, Ballance. I don't blame anyone. I just feel sorry for everyone now. I'll say goodbye now, because any minute the Cubes are liable to start doing what we've taught them to do. To hate. And—kill."

"What're you talking about?" Clev-

enger stepped back. His eyes flickered.

Ballance said. "Explain yourself. Or you'll go back to the ship under guard, and you'll be put in solitary until you get back to Earth for a trial."

Burkeson shivered. "Maybe it's better this way. We've gotten this far. Maybe we'd go on and on and wherever we'd go, we would always be superior. Top dog. Any race that didn't look like us—they'd be like ants in an ant-bill, like you said, Clevenger. Wherever we'd go, we'd take hatred with us, and suspicion, and contempt, and the ability to conceive and wage mass warfare, total slaughter. And who knows, Clevenger, maybe we're the only race in the Universe who can even think of such a thing. No other animal on Earth ever thought of it. Maybe what the Cubes are doing is all right. I don't know. It's too late now to care."

Burkeson raised a hand and leaned against the wall. His face was drawn tight, and perspiration made a stream down his throat. The two guards shifted uneasily, their rifles trained on his stomach. The weapon in Ballance's hand wasn't steady. He looked at Burkeson.

"All right, I'll tell you," Burkeson whispered. A curious coolness slid along his spine.

"We're all going to die. Maybe if we start right now, we could get out of the city. The Cubes don't understand yet, all of the meaning of what they got out of me. They've learned about hate, and the idea of killing for self protection. They've learned the art of killing to keep from being killed. It may be a little while yet before they're able to convert their faculties to techniques of killing. But there might be a chance. So maybe if

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we get out of the city fast, we can make it—"

Clevenger smiled thinly. "We don't run from a bunch of cubes, Burkeson. You're crazy, that's the size of it. That sensitive, artistic, mind of yours has cracked wide open. That music has been too much for you. Go on back—"

"Wait a minute!" Ballance got up. He moved around the desk in quick tense strides. "Maybe Burkeson does know something. These men are under my command, and I'm responsible for their safety. I can't afford to overlook a possibility of danger. After all, Clevenger, we're in alien surroundings. We shouldn't gamble with these men's welfare."

"It's too late," Burkeson whispered harshly. "The game's over."

"What?"

One of the guards covering Burkeson screamed shrilly. He was on his knees screaming. The other guard had disappeared. His rifle lay on the floor. The second guard sprawled out flat, screaming hysterically, pounding his closed hands against the smooth glistening floor.

"He fell apart, all at once, and nothing's left of him. He fell apart, crumbled away in the air. He fell—"

Ballance yelled into his wrist radiolal phone. "Attention! Attention! The Cubes are attacking us. Shoot your way out of the city now! Now! Every Cube is your enemy. Fire full neutron charge into every cube encountered. . . ."

Ballance was still giving out orders, and running toward Burkeson when he crumbled away to drift like dust on the air. The coiled revolver thudded and spun across the floor. And suddenly the revolver also disintegrated completely, leaving no trace.

CLEVENGER was staring at the remaining guard's sprawled body as it was shaken to pieces, vibrated out of existence. The two guards'

rifles followed, into the air it seemed, as Clevenger watched.

He moved in short jerky steps toward Burkeson, and he slid the heavy coiled weapon from its case and leveled it. His eyes were dark and hot and saliva quivered on his lower lip.

His whisper was dry. "You told the Cubes! Didn't you? You let them know why we're here! You little sniveling, crawling quisling!"

Burkeson shook his head slowly, sadly. "No. No, they found out from me, but I don't know how. A universality of musical language maybe. Or maybe just a coincidence that the cubes had an emotional evaluation set to music that is somewhat similar to ours. Anyway they found out. Just as I found out things about them.

"Clevenger—they knew only beauty and peace—until now. Maybe they did know other things way back somewhere in their beginning, but it was almost gone as a racial memory until now. We revived it, gave it stark meaning. We've changed the music of their language, Clevenger. Can't you hear the thematic change? Can't you feel it?"

Clevenger's eyes fled wildly around the hall. His skin was gray and his eyes were hot and black. There were two lines, thin ugly lines, crawling down his cheeks to his mouth. He wet his lips carefully, and the coiled revolver shook in his hand.

"They've learned from us," Burkeson whispered, "a new theme. And they might have forgotten the meaning of fear and hate and kill. They knew what we felt. They know that more and more rockets would come, if they let them come. And that more and more hate and contempt would come with the rockets, and finally destruction. So they're stopping us. Now."

Clevenger yelled something.

"They're stopping us now, in the only way we can understand."

Clevenger screamed. "We're not

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finished yet! Maybe they'll get us, but there'll be more rockets all right! Thousands and thousands! Looking for revenge for what the Cubes are and what they've done to us. They'll atom-bomb this city to dust! All right, so the Cubes'll get me! But I'm going to have the satisfaction of getting you, Burkeson, my way. You dirty little quisling!"

Clevenger started to fire the coiled revolver. The revolver and his right arm disappeared. Clevenger stared at the emptiness. His face was a terrible sculpture in wet, shiny putty.

Burkeson gasped. "No! I don't think any more of our rockets will ever land here now, or even get within homing range of Mars. Not now. The Cubes have mastered ultrasonics and supersonics; they can do things our science won't reach for a million years. They can even induce high frequency focused waves far out in space to disintegrate any approaching rockets. That's what I'm wondering about now, Clevenger:

"What is their limit? What is the range of their ultrasonic power?"

Perhaps, Burkeson thought, Clevenger was wondering about that too when his body crumbled away and drifted across the room in a cloud of dissipating dust.

BURKESON staggered into the Martian afternoon. He walked down the wide beautiful street, alone. He knew he was the only one left alive now. Molecules shattered into invisible forms by tremendous acceleration, by forces no human mind could understand.

A human body changed almost immediately by ultrasonic frequency so high there was no accompanying noise or vibration audible, into particles so small they floated in air, and were of colloidal dimensions.

And he felt the growing momentum of the change in the musical voice of the city.

He walked stiffly, dazed and numb with shock, and with the other feelings, too. Of resignation, and a sense of the incredible beauty around him, not quite drowned yet by hate.

He sat down in the shade cast by the rocket and waited. There was nothing else to do, nothing else he particularly wanted to do. He knew that after a while, the music would alter its theme to such an extent that there would be no longer any sympathy with him. Then they would get him too, as they had the others.

Their hate would rise and rise until he and the ship would become its objects. So Burkeson sat and looked at the distant Martian city spires fingering the moonlight of Phobos. And as he sat and waited, the symphony from the city gradually fell into the sombreness of Flat and Minor keys. It lost slowly and forever its radiance and warm joyousness of B, and the gay brilliance and alertness of D, and the noble elegance and grace of B^b.

Flats and Minors dominated completely, and the brooding thundering hate rolled through the dark. Sadness and agitation, and doleful anxiety changed to brutal, sinister, funereal and violent hate.

What is the range of their ultrasonic radiative power, Burkeson was thinking. He looked up. He tried to pick out which of the stars in the sky was Earth. But he was no astronomer, and maybe that wouldn't make much difference either.

The Cubes had learned the value of aggression. That complete sudden devastating offense was the only defense. Again he looked at the stars, at a probable Earth. If the Cubes could focus and funnel enough power—that far. If they could, they would not wait for any more rockets to cross that space. . . .

He stood up, and raised his hand. Their theme was altered now. He whispered. "Good-bye, beautiful people."

A few hours before the Cubes might have understood this sentiment. But not now. Burkeson's last sensory impression was of a small lonely chord in the Major key of E, trying to be radiant and warm and joyous, and dying in a rising roar of thundering discordancies.

MAIL FROM PLANET TERRA

(Continued from page 117)

have been a novel with the theme well thought out.

"Discord" was just that. An old theme. I read it, but I always knew what was coming.

"Forbidden Fruit" should have been forbidden. Same as "Discord."

All in all, a very good first try. As for the comics, well at least cut them to size and forget about trimmed edges. . . .

Charles A. Drummond
427 So. Olive St.,
Los Angeles 12, Calif.

LIKES CUMMINGS

Dear Mr. Wellheim:

Well, well, congrats. The first ish of *Out of This World Adventures* was a dandy. Nothing outstanding, but the general level of the stories was good.

Where did you dig up that Cummings story? It reads like some of his older (and better) novelettes. I've always liked Cummings, since I read "Space Flight of Terror" some years ago. But lately it seems to me that most of what stories I've run across by him aren't much good. "The Planet Smashers" was different, tho! The old Cummings. Best story in the ish. Followed by (in this order): "Omega and the Wolf Girl," "The Puzzle of Pripipiri," "Terror of the Mist-Maidens," "The Shipwrecked Bogey Man," "Forbidden Fruit," "Letter From the Stars" (How's chances for this being the first of a Van Vogt series?), "The Discord Makers."

I didn't list the comic book section with rest, but I rather liked it. Something new in SF mags, anyway.

Who drew the cover? I don't know what it is about that cover, but it gets me. It has a sort of elusive quality I never before saw on a cover. Your inside illustrators are

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both new, aren't they? I liked McWilliams the best. . . Keep up the good work. Yours atomatically,

Frank E. McNamara
Granger, Mo.

WANTS A COMPANION MAG

Dear Sir:

I was pleasantly surprised to find your mag on the stands. As you say, it is something new in mags. I'll be honest with you. Ed, I just don't like comics. The stories were all very good. I'm glad to see Cummings is making a comeback. He's been one of my favorites since I read his "Man on the Meteor." I think the best story was "The Shipwrecked Boyey Man." That kind of stuff is always good reading.

Since this mag compares with the old "Cosmic," why not bring out another one like "Stirring"? The short fantasy stories in that mag are still good reading, almost ten years after printing. Sincerely,

T. J. Oliver
712 32 Street,
Columbus, Ga.

BACK TEN YEARS

Dear Sir:

What is Avon trying to do, put Science Fiction back ten years? Comic books don't belong in a S-F publication! I have not yet read the stories in your first issue, but however good they may be they can hardly offset the distaste induced by your "Illustrated Fantasy Stories." I still cannot understand how anyone could publish such junk at this stage of science fiction development.

There are a few improvements that could be made, with respect to the cover and inside illustrations. These, however, would be waste of effort until you get rid of the comics. Yours truly,

Charles Morris
2757 Claflin Avenue
Bronx 63, N. Y.

(Putting science-fiction back ten years would bring it back to 1940, a period when it was showing a very promising boom similar to today's and nipped only by the war. Actually it is only in a period of strength and vigor that a science-fiction magazine like ours could venture to experiment in an effort to enlarge the circle of its readers. Our illustrated story section is such a venture, and rather than "putting science fiction back," we are inclined to believe it will help to spread the borders of the rapidly growing mass of science-fiction readers. D. A. W.)

HE'S CHOKING

Oh, Great Gha! You have at last published a sciencifantasy magazine that has everything—everything that fan have been objecting to for years. My aching back! First a corny cover with garish gal and asinine alien. Then a name that is literally "Out of this World." Story plots, some of them, that went out with horseshoe carriages. Illustrators who must inhabit padded cells. Short articles that should have stood in bed. Untrimmed edges. And, not yet satisfied, you graciously throw a real genuine, 24-Karat Komic book in for good measure. Ugh! Pardon me while I quietly choke. Wake up, man! !

Frank F. Gloves
605 West Oak
Carbondale, Ill.

APPROVES ADULT COMICS

Dear Mr. Wolfheim:

It is with pleasure that we are able to welcome *Out of This World Adventures* into the realm of an ever increasing number of science-fiction and fantasy magazines. With the plethora of allegedly serious and semi-serious publications along the same lines as O. O. T. W. A., it is somewhat of a refreshing stimulant to have your 'zine along with the others due to the very novel introduction of adult illustrated "comics" centered around the STFantasy medium, something which has not yet been tried elsewhere. . . .

Albeit, you have at least resurrected the "comics" from a point of infancy, to the medium that it virtuously belongs to, as far as adult entertainment goes.

Your selection of authors, and their stories, is indeed commendable for a first issue, although "name authors" like Van Vogt, Cummings, del Rey and Tenn isn't necessarily the rule for fine stories. However, it is more for the editor to judge to the best of his ability rather than for a large legion of readers to later on condemn the publication.

The best stories—and they really were excellent—in your first issue were:

"The Planet-Smashers" by Cummings.
... "Letter from the Stars" by Van Vogt.
"Terror of the Mist-Maidens" by Chandler
and "Omega and the Wolf-Girl" by Wm. Tenn. Regarding the other stories, in brief retrospect, I can only add that they were comparably equal to what most other STFantasy 'zine editors go searching for with a lighted lantern in order to find.

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Calvin Thos. Beck, Pres.
American Science-Fantasy Society,
P. O. Box 577, Grand Central Station,
New York 17, N. Y.

BOGEY MAN FIRST

Dear Mr. Wollheim:

Out of *This World's* first issue seems a very promising one. The fiction is interesting, and the artwork well-done. Here is how I rate the stories:

1- *The Shipwrecked Bogey Man*

This was a fine bit of weird stf, and the McWilliam pic for it was equally good. The McWilliam artwork, by the way, was one of the highlights of the issue.

2- *Terror of the Mist-Maidens*

Chandler, in this story near his best, can always be depended upon for an interesting and thought-provoking story. I am glad that no false note of romance was injected into TOTM-M.

3- *Letter from the Stars*

A departure from Van Vogt's usual style, and a welcome one. I like almost all of V's stuff, but a change of pace is in order once in a while.

4- *Forbidden Fruit*

This was a very fine short story, quite good, even for Neville.

5- *Omega and the Wolf-Girl*

Lester Del Rey's stories have undergone a marked change for the worse within the past few years, but this was only a bad story when compared to Del Rey's better work.

6- *The Planet Smashers*

The less said about a Cummings story, the better. This, as all his others was unadulterated hack.

7- *The Discord Makers*

Reynolds disappointed me in this rather poor imitation of *Conqueror's Isle*.

The cover was very poor in contrast to the almost uniformly good inside pics. I definitely disapprove of the comic section. If I want to read a joke book (which I don't), I'll go out to the newsstand and buy one. Comic book stf is usually unoriginal and childish.

It appears that I've failed to rate Tenn's *The Puzzle of Prigilivil*. I'd rank that story sixth, between *Omega* and *The Wolf-Girl* and the Cummings opus. Scientifantastically,

Morton D. Paley
1455 Townsend Ave.,
New York 52, N. Y.

DISAPPOINTED

Dear DAW,

I have just finished reading the first edition of *Out of This World* and I must say I'm disappointed. I expected much more from the editor of the *Avon Fantasy Reader*, you should know better.

The cover wasn't too bad, but I think there are better mediums than water color, don't you? The format of the contents page was good, but it's hard to find words to describe the picture. The last time I saw anything like it was in the note book of an aspiring artist aged 5 years. Improvement here is definitely needed.

The interior pics weren't too good either. Martin is all right, but McWilliam should stick to comic books. How about Finley, Lawrence and some of the other really good illustrators?

The stories were neither good nor bad; they were not comparable to the stories you have chosen in the *Fantasy Reader*.

And now here is my highest complaint. Comics have no place in this type mag, why use up good "story space" for that trash? I do hope the first will be the last. A reputation for good stories will sell far more copies than "Heykids! they got funnies in the middle."

Hoping to find Vol. 1 No. 2 greatly improved and wishing you all the success in and out of this world, I remain, Yours,

Stephen Y. Adams
54 So. So. Carolina Ave.,
Atlantic City, N. J.

A FINE INITIAL ISSUE

Dear Mr. Wolfheim:

I have just read the first issue of the new S-F magazine *Out of This World* Adventures, and would like to congratulate you on a very excellent start. Certainly *Avon* is not unknown in this field, but I think few S-F mags, if any, can point to such a fine initial issue.

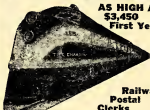
I also approve of your editorial policy concerning the stressing of space flight. This seems consistent with the title of the mag.

The story by Ray Cummings I especially liked, but the others were good, with maybe a reservation or two.

I do have a few suggestions: (1) Acknowledge the illustrator. (2) Next time, get a cover more in line with the accepted for a science-fiction magazine. (3) Keep McWilliam, if for no other reason for the illustration for "Omega and the Wolf-Girl." (4) I may be in the minority here, but I do not especially care for the color

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stories. Seems a bit like a comic book, and hardly appropriate considering the high plane which has been reached in sf literature. (5) The two-novelle system is good, but I think occasionally a longer work might be substituted.

This is rather immaterial, however, for the difference between a good and bad magazine lies in the intelligent selection of stories. I am convinced this is not lacking here, and for this reason, I confidently predict great success for *Out of This World Adventures*.

Hervey B. Bigbee, Jr., D.D.
Bolivar, Tenn.

OUR SPRUES SHOWING?

Dear Mr. Wollheim:

This letter is intended for your statistical aid only, since I am not interested in making letter columns. A highly typed story is interesting chiefly for the treatment, and a fair yarn is down-graded for a reader who has seen several in the same pattern, unless the handling is very clever. This initial issue suggested an analogy with mass-produced moulded plastic objects, in that too frequently the sprues and mould marks showed too plainly.

Ratings: Best in issue: Shipwrecked Bogey Man, Letter From the Stars, Puzzle of Pripliriri.

Too-simple space opera: Planet Smashers.

Shook up "Lady or the Tiger" with last man theme, but poor emulsion: Omega and the W-G.

Sprues need trimming: Terror of the Mist-Maidens, Discord Makers, Forbidden Fruit.

As to the Comic Book inclusion, I presume you have a survey indicating I'm in the minority, or you wouldn't have done it? However, if it leads any simon-pure picture-readers to tackle connected text, I'm all for it.

Illus: Cover: Fair. I prefer the "sharp focus" pix. Inside: Fair. Adequate but not outstanding.

I was pleased to find the common rash of misprints and transposed lines missing. A few errors don't matter, but too many pulps appear to have no proofreading at all.

Dorothea M. Danifon
305 W. Lywood St.
Phoenix, Ariz.

OOTWA!

Dear Editor:

I have just completed my perusal of Volume 1, Number 1 and am all set to annoy you with my opinions, but before

I go on to them I want to talk about something else. You know how fans refer to different STF-zines by using the initials of the mag? Well, using this system on your magazine I come up with OOTWA. Egad!

Now for comments on the stories:

"The Planet Smashers" by Ray Cummings was poorly titled. I have read a few other stories by Cummings and found them rather dry; this story was an exception. It had a wonderful setting—all the magic of the Mardi Gras and the splendor of the Philadelphia Mummers' parade and the magnificence of the Festival of Qen in the ancient and forgotten city of Shanadu was in that story. The setting was very, very nice.

The plot, however, was weak. That ending was pretty bad. It is like reading a detective story and then having the detective solve the murder with a clue that wasn't revealed to the readers; you feel cheated. . . .

Dave Hammond
806 Oak St.,
Runnemede, N. J.

COMIC SECTION WONDERFUL

Dear Sir:

Thank you. Thank you very much for the finest magazine of fantasy and science fiction literature in a long time. It is really an unusual magazine with a radical format and a venture that no other mag has ever attempted. Your comic section is very wonderful.

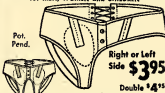
Avon has done more for the fantasy fans than any other publishing house. They have given us such pocket books as *For Woman*, *Out of the Silent Planet*, and now *Princess of the Atom*. The latter I have just finished reading and it is superb. I am also glad to see that it is a first of a series. I now have the whole group of fans here watching for the second one—*The Green Girl*.

"The Planet Smashers" was a top story. But it was not up to "The Princess of the Atom." But it was still a fine story. Van Vogt's story was also very good. Only one story in the issue was not very good. That was "The Terror of the Mist-Maidens." It was lousy. But no magazine can always have the very best of the best every issue. But I can see now that you are striving for it. Good luck. You will make it. Fan-tastically yours,

Roger Nelson
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